

180 Days and Counting

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180 Days and Counting

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Summary

Bucky Barnes needed out of his current school. Luckily, his old college buddy, Natasha Romanoff, knew of an open position at her elementary school. This is the story of Bucky adjusting to his new workplace, the fantastic and crazy teachers who also work there, and how difficult it is not to crush on the art teacher across the hall.

Notes

Someone, I don't know who, gave the_wordbutler a fic prompt of Bucky and Steve being elementary school teachers and falling in love. I butted my way onto the bandwagon, and this series of words was born.

In this chapter, we meet our main players in the in-service (staff only) days leading up to the opening day of the school year.

Special thanks to Tama_Abi for helping us out with Pepper's French.

Introductions

Bucky Barnes climbed out of his car and took a moment to observe his surroundings. The elementary school's parking lot was rapidly filling up. Even though the building was a new one to him, he took comfort in the familiar sights of a playground and a lot full of mini-vans and older sedans. Well, all the cars looked like that save the red, flashy sports car whose license plate read "STRK2".

Bucky pulled his messenger bag over his shoulder before grabbing the last box of things he needed to finish setting up his new second grade classroom from the backseat. He hip-checked the door shut on his green Corolla and took a deep breath before heading into the building.

It was the first in-service day of the school year at his new school. He'd spent the last four years teaching fourth graders at another elementary school in the district, but the social groups among the staff had clinched into cliques that didn't interact with each other, and the principal was clearly coasting his way to the maximum pension payments before retiring. By the end of last year, Bucky had been so frustrated that the only option he felt he had was to transfer to another school. Thankfully, his old college friend had let him know there was an opening for a second grade teacher at the school where she served as the P.E. teacher, and Bucky was able to earn his transfer. Not that Bucky believed tenure is the greatest of ideas (he'd seen too many teachers become spontaneously lazy once they hit that mark), but job security was a nice thing to have in this economy and transferring out to a different district meant he'd have to start all over again. Even though it was a new building and staff, as soon as Bucky hit those doors, he'd be tenured for the start of his fifth year, and that was a nice, secure feeling to have.

Granted, switching schools had its downsides, too. It meant shifting from team lead over his intermediate grade down to second grade, and losing his extra title and barely-there bump in pay, but he didn't particularly care. It would be nice to have a break from extra meetings while adjusting. And he enjoyed the challenge of a new grade, a new building, and a new curriculum; he never wanted to be that teacher who settled on lesson plans and never updated them.

But all of it was still new. He'd logged a number of hours in his room in the last couple of weeks, but hadn't met too many new faces. He knew Natasha, of course, and owed her big time for helping him transfer over. He'd also met Jessica Drew, the team lead for second grade, but she'd been on her way out to make a Target run for supplies. She'd offered to have him tag along, but he had boxes to unpack. And he'd already gone himself—twice.

As he approached the office vestibule door, he started to shift the box in his arms so he could have a free hand when a voice behind him shouted, "I'll get that!" Bucky turned to see a man with dark curly hair, glasses, and a shy smile rushing up to the door. "Here," he said, "you've got your hands full."

"Thank you, uh—"

"Bruce. Bruce Banner. I'm one of the kindergarten teachers."

"Bruce," he acknowledged with a nod. "I'm Bucky. New to second grade."

The other man's eyes scrunched in slight confusion. "Bucky? I heard about a James."

Bucky rolled his eyes as he walked into the office. "I take it you're friends with Natasha. Call me Bucky; she's the only one who calls me James."

“Because Bucky is a stupid name,” came a familiar voice.

He turned with a smile at the petite redhead. “Morning, Nat.”

“About time you showed up, I’ve been waiting on you,” she answered from the spot on the front counter she was perched on.

A moment of panic settled into his chest as he tried to nonchalantly yet frantically search the walls for a clock. Bruce chuckled behind him. “Don’t worry. You’re on time for your first day here. The Soviet just thinks that being anything less than a half hour early means you’re running late.”

Natasha shot Bruce a dirty look as he moved around the pair of them to a place deeper into the office before retorting, “Punctuality is appreciated by most people, Banner. And besides, James here was perpetually late in college. I’m surprised you made it this early, actually.”

“Haha, very funny.”

“Seriously, how many extra miles did you have to run for being late for ROTC in school?”

“And just when I thought about getting you a nice gift for getting me hired here.”

“I accept cash and killer heels.”

Bucky smiled, “I’ll keep that in mind.” He looked around the office. Their principal—Fury—was conversing with a tall redhead by the copier, and the busty brunette—Darcy, if he remembered correctly—who ran things in the front office was busy putting on finishing touches to her nails with a lime green polish pen. He felt his mouth quirk in confusion, and he leaned in towards Natasha. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll help you put your stuff in your room, then we can hit up the breakfast spread in the cafeteria before meetings get started in the library.”

“Breakfast spread?” Bucky asked.

Natasha rolled her eyes in response. “Of course that’s the part you’re focused on. Whenever we have in-service days, the PTA brings us breakfast.”

“Nice.”

“Depends on how you look at it,” Bruce commented on his way back from the mailboxes. “On the one hand, it’s great having a supportive PTA, but on the other hand I’m pretty sure it’s just the first of many attempts by the president of the group to suck up to the staff as a preemptive apology for his kids’ behavior.”

“I’ll second that theory,” Natasha agreed with a dark tone in her voice. “I despise the Odinson boys.”

“Rumor has it the youngest one is the worst of all,” Bruce whispered conspiratorially.

“She’d have to be to handle her older brothers,” Natasha replied.

“Henrik Odinson,” Bucky said slowly. “That name’s on my roster.”

Natasha snorted. “Good luck with that. And he’ll want you to call him Henry. He only gets the full Swedish name treatment when he’s being yelled at by his mother, who is a saint for putting up with that family.”

Bruce nodded in sympathy. “I had Henry two years ago. His parents liked me so much I have the middle one this year, and probably the sister next year. Lucky me.”

“You know you can say no to that, right?” Natasha commented, but Bruce just shrugged. She patted his arm before hopping off the counter and purposefully bumping into Bucky. “Let’s drop your stuff off, I’m starving.”

As they made their way through the halls to his room, he was tempted to start listing off other names to Natasha to see what all he was up against, but he shook off the thought. He didn’t want to start the year with prejudices. Granted, it was nice to have some warning about bad cases, but he didn’t want to kick off the school year with a bias before he even shook a kid’s hand on the first day. Yes, he shakes hands with his students on the first day. Shut up.

Once they arrived at his door, he propped the box in his arms between his hip and the wall so he could dig in his pockets for the key. He unlocked his door and set the box on his desk, taking a look around and tweaking his mental list for everything he needed to get done over the next two days before the kids arrived.

Movement to his right caught his eye. He turned his head to see dust cloths being removed from large tables with chairs on them in the room across the hall. But once his eyes were focused in that direction, it wasn’t the swirling cream cloth floating through the air that held his attention; it was the person manipulating the material.

The shoulders were the first thing Bucky noticed—strong and broad and barely contained under the faded red cotton t-shirt. Through the windows, and there were plenty in the room, the sunshine made the man’s blonde hair glow a golden hue. Bucky’s eyes trailed on down the rest of the other man’s physique and his mind came to two conclusions. One: his brain was starting to sound like one of those damn “bedroom books” his Aunt Diane was always reading (even at some family functions). Two: it was going to be simultaneously enticing and excruciating, having to teach across the hall from this person. He sent up a quick and silent prayer that whenever the man turned around that his face would be haggard, but no such luck. The other man had a jaw chiseled from stone, and a torso that even from this distance made Bucky’s fingertips twitch.

If his brain had been functioning properly, he would have been quicker to pick up on signs that Natasha noticed his prolonged silence, but it wasn’t. And before he knew it, the redhead was sashaying out of his room and into the hall. “Steve—come over here and meet James.”

Steve walked into Bucky’s room with a smile that could light a Christmas tree. And Bucky was frozen solid in place. One small, still functioning part of his brain flashed back to one of the girls in his class last year talking about what it was like to meet Justin Bieber, and Bucky had to give his head a little shake to get his neurons starting again.

“Steve Rogers—art teacher,” the blonde man said as he extended a hand. “I’ll apologize now for having kids rotating outside your room every forty-five minutes and for when glitter eventually wafts its way across the hall into your class.”

“Bucky Barnes—second grade,” he replied with a smile. Steve shook his hand—a good strong grip, but not too overbearing—and slid a look at Natasha. Bucky sighed and gave an annoyed look at his old friend. “You’ve told them all to call me James, didn’t you?”

“I refuse to call you that stupid name.”

“I like that stupid name, and it’s the only thing anyone’s called me—save you and my drill instructors—my entire life.”

“New year, new school, new you.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “I’m fine with the current me, thank you.”

Natasha shrugged before turning to Steve. “Have you eaten yet?”

The other man’s blue eyes lit up at the mention of food. “No, but I heard Thor pulled out all the stops.”

“Preemptive apology.”

Steve gave a disapproving look to Natasha. “His kids aren’t that bad.”

Bucky fought back a smile when he saw a single red eyebrow raise in response before her mouth finished her reply. “Remember that one day you were out last year and Henry dumped red fingerpaint all over his hand, slammed the blade down on the paper cutter, and made Wilson think he’d chopped off all his fingers?”

Steve grimaced. “I didn’t think I’d ever get Wade to sub for me again after that.”

Natasha shook her head. “I told you all you had to do was bribe him back with promises of a six pack and a movie from the bargain bin at Wal-Mart.” She paused to look up at the clock on the wall. “C’mon, we need to go now if we want to get food before Fury gets started.”

Ten minutes later, Bucky seated himself at a table in the library with a plate containing a bagel and fruit. Natasha sat to his right with Steve on her other side. Bucky’s brain slid its attention from Steve’s body to the heaping pile of carbs (who eats a donut and a bagel?) sitting in front of the art teacher. Bucky wondered for a moment, while munching on a strawberry, how a man who looked to be about ninety-nine percent lean muscle could eat like that.

“Is that a strawberry?” a new voice at the table asked. Bucky looked up from his seat to see a man with dark hair and goatee eyeing his plate suspiciously. “It is, dammit. I told Fabio to keep strawberries out of the breakfast spread. But did he listen? No. Pepper!” And now the guy was shouting across the library. Bucky turned his head to see the tall redhead who was conversing with Fury in the office earlier, look up from her spot at what was clearly designated as the head table by the mounds of paperwork waiting to be distributed to the staff. “Hey, Pepper!”

“Yes, Tony?” she replied, practiced patience evident in her tone.

This Tony thrust an index finger in the direction of Bucky’s plate. “Beware the strawberries. I don’t want you to come over here and breathe the air and have an allergic reaction.”

“That’s not how my allergy works, really, but thank you for the head’s up.”

“Just being a protective and loving husband, dear.”

“Will you sit down and quit annoying your wife,” Bruce said as he took a seat next to the man with the goatee.

“Hey, I’m trying to look out for her wellbeing. That is not being annoying. And if I’m talking, it means I can control the subject of the conversation, and it won’t be about that damn *Fifty Shades* and all its kinkery like it was non-stop at the end of last school year. I know way too much about the sexual fantasies of the women on staff here.”

“Those books weren’t that kinky,” quipped a new voice belonging to pale man with glasses and

dark hair who took the seat across from Bucky.

Tony groaned in pain. “Gross, Coulson. I don’t need to know that much about you and Barton.”

The man smiled and extended his hand across the table. “Phil Coulson, we’ve emailed a few times.” Bucky nodded and shook his head. He tried to match the sexual overshare with the polite and mild-mannered emails he’d exchanged with the resident librarian regarding the school’s Accelerated Reader program. It did not compute.

“Way to go, Phil,” Tony quipped. “You fried the new guy’s brain.”

“Aww,” whined a man in a purple t-shirt who sat down next to Phil, “that’s supposed to be my job.”

“What’s yours is mine and all of that,” Phil answered. “This is Clint,” he commented to Bucky.

“Fifth grade. And you’re James, right?” Clint asked.

“Bucky,” he corrected. “Please call me Bucky.”

“I’m going to need to know the story behind that nickname,” responded a tall blonde woman who sat down to his left. “Carol Danvers,” she said as she extended her hand. “I cover SpEd for fourth and fifth grade.”

“Nice to meet you,” Bucky responded.

Carol then turned to Clint, who was sitting across from her. “You talk to Jessica Cage yet?”

He rolled his eyes in response. “Yeah, she was waiting for me this morning to tell me. How did you find out already? I thought she was keeping it a secret for a while.”

“I know everything, Clint,” Carol answered with a smirk.

“Yeah, you are terrifying that way.”

Bucky saw Phil’s eyebrows knit together in concern, “What’s going on?”

Clint pursed his lips together and paused before answering. “She’s pregnant. She’s going to be out the last couple of months of the school year on maternity leave.”

Phil cringed. “Losing your fifth grade math teacher right before state assessments? Ouch. Couldn’t you have prevented her from doing that, being team lead and all?”

“Uh, no. What do you want from me? Tell her husband to have better timing with his sex life? The guy looks like he could throw a semi-truck over his shoulder and walk around with it. Pretty sure he’d punch me right into the ground. Is that what you want?”

“How much is your life insurance policy worth again?”

“Our love is dead, Phil.”

“So,” Tony—at least that’s what Bucky thought his name was—drawled while leaning in with a wicked smile on his face. “Barton ended up with the Hill twins. Bets on how long it will be before he sends at least one of them to the office. I say two weeks.”

There were various bets made ranging from “Three days—just to scare some sense into them” from

Natasha, to Clint's own bet of "Never." The eyes turned to Bucky since he'd remained silent, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I need context."

"Twin boys who raise hell," Natasha explained. "They're raised by a single mom who's vice principal at the middle school next door. So not only are they normally trouble, but this is their last year to do it without being in their mom's school, which means they'll probably be ten times worse this year."

Bucky eyed Clint. "You don't think you'll send them at all?"

Clint's chin raised a bit at the challenge, and the resoluteness in his eyes immediately let Bucky know already that this staff would be a great one to work with, one determined to better their students. "No," he answered with great assurance.

Bucky paused before responding to Tony. "No bet."

"Wuss," Tony mocked. "Coulson?"

"I learned a long time ago not to bet against Clint."

That earned a smile of pride from the man. "Thanks."

"And, Tony, would you please stop slinging your mug everywhere. You spill coffee in my library again, and I'll run every single cord I can find in this school through the paper shredder."

"Geez, Phil, relax. Clint, your husband has serious anger issues."

Bucky nearly choked on his bagel at the word "husband". He tried to be as subtle as possible when looking across the table to confirm the bands present on each man's left hand.

"You have no idea. Just be grateful you've never forgotten to switch the laundry over and left his favorite t-shirts sitting in the washer overnight."

"They still smell sour," Phil grumbled.

Clint rolled his eyes. "It was two years ago, Phil. It hasn't happened since. If I buy you a rack of new shirts, will you please drop it?" Their private chat time was then ended by Fury calling everyone's attention. He made a point to introduce new people, which included a first grade teacher, a student teacher (some kid named Peter who was related to the music teacher), and Bucky—who had to tell everyone that he preferred being called that over James, much to Natasha's huff of displeasure.

They signed their various forms, reviewed the necessary information, and over the next few hours did all the boring meetings that were consuming too much time on teachers' schedules. Fury, at least, seemed to recognize this fact and did his best to be efficient.

They broke at a little after twelve for an extended lunch break. "Alright," Tony declared, and Bucky was starting to pick up on the fact that the man enjoyed being the center of attention. "New guy gets to pick where we're going to lunch."

Bucky felt all eyes turn on him, and he leaned over to Nat. "Why do I feel like this is a test?"

"Because it is."

"Fantastic," he muttered. "Umm, Mexican okay with everyone?"

“Which place?” Tony asked, giving him a skeptical look.

“There’s that hole in the wall place over off Thompson. Is that okay?”

“Congratulations,” Tony proclaimed, “you have acceptable taste in enchiladas.” He paused before cupping his hands around his mouth once more. “Pepper! Pepper, we’re going to La Mesa.” The redhead paused briefly in her conversation with the vice-principal, Sitwell, to give Tony a thumbs up.

“Will you please stop yelling across the room at her?” Bruce asked.

“Will you please stop wasting your breath trying to teach him manners?” Carol countered.

Bucky bit back a laugh as Tony flipped her off for the comment, but he failed at keeping his laughter quiet when Carol returned the gesture with both hands. The nine of them crammed themselves into two cars and made their way over to the little Mexican joint. As soon as they all sat down, the pretty redhead reached across the table and extended her hand to Bucky. “Hi, I’m Pepper, in case you didn’t gather that from my husband shouting it constantly.”

Tony leaned over into her personal space. “You love it when I’m shouting your name,” he said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

She rolled her eyes. “We’re in public, please behave.” She turned her attention back to Bucky. “I’m school counselor. If you need anything—”

“She specializes in art therapy,” Tony interrupted. “Draw her a picture of a house; she’ll tell you all the ways your childhood was screwed up.”

Pepper patted her husband’s leg. “If you need anything, please let me know.”

“I will, thank you.”

Lunch was spent catching each other up on how they spent their summers: vacations, sleeping in, redecorating homes. Bucky tried his best to tuck away what facts he could: Phil and Clint had a bulldog named Birdie, Natasha took her annual trip to Chicago to spend an awkward week with her father, Steve’s mother lived two hours away, and Bruce read science journals for fun.

“So,” Bruce started, “you knew Natasha in college. How did you meet?”

“The ROTC dorm was next to the dorm for the student athletes, so we ran into each other on the way to and from classes,” Bucky explained.

“You two ever bang?” Tony asked.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Ignore him. You do not have to answer that.”

“We had a few dates,” Natasha answered, “but his roommate, Alex, was cuter.”

“There was definite banging in that relationship,” Bucky commented.

Natasha waved his comment off. “It’s not our fault you were skipping class.”

“Not every time. Seriously, was it that hard to look up and see if I was taking a nap in the top bunk before you started going at it?”

Natasha shrugged and went back to finishing her fish tacos.

“What was she like in college?” Clint asked.

“Yeah,” Natasha said with a threatening tone in her voice, “why don’t you tell them more stories about what I was like?”

Bucky paused to decide how big of a hole he wanted to dig for himself on his first day. “Her hair was longer.”

Natasha smiled and saluted him with her glass of water in appreciation while the others groaned in disappointment. “That’s bullshit, Barnes.” Clint said. “I know she’s terrifying, but we will get information out of you eventually. Natasha, how do we bribe him?”

“You want me to tell you how to bribe him in order to get dirt on me? Why would I do that?”

“Because you love me.”

Natasha looked like she was going to roll her eyes, but then she got a look on her face that made Bucky’s stomach drop. “He seems to like blondes.”

Carol announced that she’d be willing to take one for the team, and Bucky felt eyes turn on him. He picked this moment to focus on pushing rice around his plate with a fork. Natasha’s mantra of “new year, new school, new you” rang in his head, but the admission stuck in his throat.

“You’re okay to hesitate,” Steve said from his right. “I went out with her once; it was... intimidating.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment, Steve.”

Bucky tried to laugh at the joke, but instead just felt like kicking himself. Of course, Steve would be straight. He wasn’t sure whether that would make looking across the hall into the art room easier or harder this year.

He pushed that thought to the back of his head when Pepper announced that it was time for them to get back to school. She turned to Tony as they all stood to make their way out of the restaurant. “If you make fewer than five sexually charged comments during your presentation on the new online gradebook system, I’ll give you a treat.”

The look on Tony’s face was the same as luring a four-year-old with a trip to Toys-R-Us. “Can we have sex in your office?”

“No. I counsel children in there. How many times do I have to tell you it’s off-limits?”

“Guess that means we’ll have to use my supply closet.” He paused to raise his voice, “And not for the first time.”

Phil sighed. “I’ve touched stuff in there.”

“Yeah,” Clint added with a wicked smirk on his face, “like my dick.” There was a collective groan from the group as Phil reached forward and goosed Clint. “Damn straight,” Clint crowed.

Tony turned and pointed a finger at the librarian. “As my team lead, Coulson, I’m going to need a purchase order to replace every piece of equipment in my closet.”

“There’s not enough money in the budget, and that closet has just as many doors leading to your computer lab as it does my library, so I don’t see how it’s ‘your’ closet.”

A couple of hours later, Tony and Pepper bickered about the number of sexual comments he made, with her counting seven and Tony counting four-and-a-half. Once Tony was done with his spiel, Fury asked the newcomers to the building to hang back a moment before they too were dismissed to spend the rest of the remaining hours of the day working in their classroom.

The principal made sure to check in with each of them to see how they were doing after their first day, to ask if they had any questions, and to make sure they were fitting in okay. Bucky assured him he was doing fine and felt like he had things mostly under control. Fury gave him a bright smile that was a stark contrast to his all-black clothes and highly-intimidating eye patch, and Bucky left the library to make his way back to his room.

He took a moment on the way there to take in a deep breath. His siblings always mocked him for having OCD tendencies since a young age. And the few days before the school year started was the only time during the whole year that a school building felt and smelled clean. And it was quiet. After some of the discussions at lunch, Bucky needed the peace to try and calm his churning thoughts.

He walked into his room to find Natasha pacing around the space, inspecting the touches he'd put on his classroom. "Don't you have a gym to put in order?" he asked.

"Everything has been pre-bleached before the mongrels start peeing on my mats, and I already have things set up for tomorrow's dodge ball tournament." She caught the confused look on his face before explaining. "During the last in-service day before school starts, we blow off some steam by holding a staff-wide dodge ball tournament. Teams are formed by grade levels." She paused to look him up and down. "Need help with anything?"

Bucky ran through his mental task list before answering. He reached for some papers on his desk and handed them to her. "I'm in charge of handling the second grade part of the Accelerated Reader contest. I've gone through the other classrooms to make sure all their books are labeled correctly, but haven't gotten to mine yet." He pointed to the three bookshelves that lined the wall under the windows of his room. "Will you check 'em for me?"

"Sure," she answered before grabbing the papers and sheets of colored dot stickers and gracefully folding herself down on the floor to run a manicured nail over the thin book spines.

"And," he continued, "a crash course on people here would be great."

"Survivor's guide? I can handle that." She paused to put a different colored dot on an Amelia Bedelia book before continuing. "Let's start with the office. As long as you're doing your job well, Fury is pretty hands off. If a parent complains, unless you're being an idiot, he's going to have your back the whole time. At least until the parent leaves, and then he'll chew your ass out if necessary.

"Sitwell handles most of the disciplinary cases. He's fair with the kids. Like Fury he's pretty hands off with the staff, too, as long as you're doing your job well.

"Pepper is amazing, but that's pretty obvious by the fact that she can handle Tony as well as she does."

"They make an interesting couple. How long have they been together?"

"They started dating three years ago. Year before last they came back from winter break married, which blindsided everyone."

“They weren’t engaged?”

“Nope. Rumors varied from a false positive on a pregnancy test to either one of them—or both—losing a bet to Tony just getting really bored one afternoon.”

“Tony seems like the kind of person who would have to get plastered in order to agree to marriage.”

Natasha shook her head. “Not the case.” Bucky raised his eyebrows at her as a silent request for more information. She pursed her lips before continuing. “Tony’s been sober for about fifteen years. He and Bruce met at an AA meeting eight years ago. Bruce is the one who got Tony hired here after everything went down with Tony’s company.”

“What happened there?”

She shook her head. “You only asked for the survivor’s guide, and some things need to be told from the person they happened to. Let’s see, oh—Darcy.

“Don’t underestimate her. Ever. It will be the last mistake you make. She will make copies for you if you’re in a pinch, but you better kiss her ass for the next week if you have to do that. She runs everyone’s schedule in the office and handles all the front desk duties. She’s amazing, but do not cross her.”

“How do you get on her good side?”

“Nail polish and Starbucks.”

“I’ll make sure to pick up a macchiato on my way into work tomorrow.”

“Smart move.” She paused while flipping through papers before finally finding a certain Eric Carle title. “Who else?”

Bucky worked his jaw back and forth and decided why not before asking his next question. “Clint and Phil are married?”

“Five years in October.”

“And the parents here... and the staff... they don’t have any issues with that?”

“There were a few parents who tried to do something about it when they first started dating, but that was the year before I came. But from what I heard, Fury told them that they weren’t doing anything that was in violation of their contracts and their instruction wasn’t affected by it. So the parents could either get over it, or there’s a parochial school a mile and a half away.” She paused to hold his eye contact before finishing her comment. “No one here will have a problem with it. You don’t need to hide.”

He nodded and looked back down at the paperwork he was sorting through. Being fifth out of six kids, he’d had to act tough if he wanted to fit in with his older and only brother’s friends (and what little brother doesn’t want to do that?). He’d had a reputation to maintain in high school, and had tried his best to do that by dating around. In college, he had tried to do the same with Natasha when they first met a few weeks into their freshmen year, but she saw past his façade. She was the first person he came out to over leftover pizza and vodka she’d smuggled out of her dad’s house after a weekend trip home. He repeated the news to his family over Thanksgiving break. Like Natasha, his four sisters and mother hadn’t been surprised by the news, and his brother and father handled it better than he thought they would. But despite that, he was ROTC and then Army, and

Don't Ask Don't Tell wasn't struck down until he was finished and teaching. Despite being able to be open with who he was with his friends, he kept things quiet at work. He received offers for dates and set-ups from his fellow teachers, but always fell back on the excuse of not wanting to mix his personal and professional life as a safe way out.

He sighed and shook his head. "Give me some time to adjust here."

She nodded. "I swear to stay silent, but," she paused and made a show of looking across the hallway, "I know someone who might be interested."

Bucky looked across the hall at Steve, who was putting various art supplies into buckets on each large table. "Him? He said he went out with Carol."

Natasha nodded. "Her and about every other single woman here. He takes them out once, maybe twice, but always finds a reason to avoid moving things along."

"Maybe he doesn't want to date his co-workers," Bucky reasoned.

"Maybe he doesn't want to date his female co-workers."

Bucky shook his head. "That's for him to decide, and I'm not going to push it."

"Okay," Natasha answered.

"And you shouldn't push it either." He paused and waited for to respond, but she remained silent with a coy look in her eye. "Natasha, I do not need you to play yenta."

"I just want you to be happy, James."

He rolled his eyes. "Cut the crap; you just want to meddle. I have four sisters—I know how this game is played. Besides, who's making you happy these days?"

"I'm single," she answered, but Bucky swore he saw a quick quirk to the corner of her mouth that made him suspicious. She must have read his thoughts because she followed her admission with, "Are you going to call me a liar?"

"Seeing as how I like my balls where they are, no, I'm not."

They spent the next hour in relative silence, Natasha making her way through his bookshelves, and Bucky making sure everything was unpacked and in its proper place. He was triple-checking the layout of his desks and making a final mental draft of how he was going to set up his bulletin boards tomorrow when Steve knocked on the door.

"I'm heading out for the day. Just wanted to wish you guys a good night." He paused to lock eyes with Bucky. "It was nice to meet you. If you ever need anything, I'm right there," he said, pointing back to his own room.

"You too. I mean, if you need anything, too, you know—I'm here."

Steve smiled before leaving. Natasha made sure he was gone before she gave Bucky a look. "Smooth."

"Shut up."

“This is the worst teambuilding activity in the universe,” Bucky decided, and then ducked out of the way of a dodge ball.

“Oooh, almost took down Barnes, but close only counts in—some kind of weird idiom.” Darcy Lewis, the office manager slash secretary slash *the person who can save your ass, remember that* (a direct quote) hopped up onto the bleachers to get a better look at the action. Her obnoxiously-loud lime green t-shirt was almost blinding, and Bucky did not miss the MY CAT WILL EAT YOUR HONOR STUDET logo stretched across her ample— Well. She raised the bullhorn back to her mouth. “Weak play by Danvers, but maybe this is a chance to regroup,” she announced. Bucky scooped up an abandoned ball. Across the center line, Carol licked her lips like a predatory cat and —

Bucky shifted the ball from one hand to another and wished that he’d qualified for “Specials 1”—namely, Natasha and Carol’s team.

Natasha, Carol, and a variety of other non-classroom teachers—including Pepper (and every time she’d dipped to collect a ball, Tony’d cat-called from the bleachers), student teacher Peter Parker (out within ten seconds), Phil (out only because Clint’d snuck up to the baseline and goosed him), and the part-time speech therapist who’d attended specifically for the dodge ball tournament— prowled along the center line, watching Bucky. Well, watching Bucky and his teammates, technically—the second- and third-grade teachers formed a single team that morning, complete with a strategy meeting (really?) and warm-up stretches (also, really?)—but Bucky felt his skin crawl, anyway. His team held two of the six balls, was whittled down to three members, and seemed incapable of keeping up with the very intense, very fast Carol Danvers.

And the absolutely terrifying Natasha Romanoff.

Along the sidelines, the other teachers cheered loudly, with Tony whistling at every opportunity. The fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, led by a stone-faced Clint Barton, had absolutely destroyed the kindergarten- and first-grade teachers; “Specials 2”, consisting of Tony, Steve, Carol’s special education subordinates, and music teacher May Parker, who’d first battled “Specials 1” in a ten-minute death match that’d left only Tony and Pepper (Pepper won) would be up against the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, next. Bucky felt like he’d never truly understand the inner workings of the tournament, but that was probably okay.

Especially since Darcy shouted, “Is it a stand-still? Is it a draw? A hush falls over the gym, the tension mounting,” and Bucky refocused on the game.

His to-do list, the one stuck to the desk in his classroom, was still a mile long, cluttered up with piecemeal tasks for the day. He’d managed, with Natasha’s help, to organize the bookshelves and sort through the leftover worksheets and assignments in the cabinets, but nothing felt ready, yet. The uncertainty was still looming, even with his first-day assignments ready and the textbooks waiting to be neatly arranged on each desk, and—

“Incoming!” someone interrupted his distracted thoughts, and Bucky barely managed to duck out of a red rubber ball aimed squarely for his head. Natasha swore loudly in Russian and raced toward the far end of their half of the gym, an optimistic approach to avoiding Bucky’s aim, but the damage was done; instead of the carefully-calculated standoff, the teams erupted into frantic, fast throws, rubber balls pinging off the walls and floor. Carol dove to her knees and caught a ball thrown by one of the third-grade teachers to much cursing; Bucky caught a ball on a rebound and winged it at Natasha, missing by all of six inches. Darcy’s frantic shouts into the bullhorn rose up through the gym, recounting the action in a piece-meal, disorganized fashion:

“Danvers might catch—no, no, she jumps out of the way, Barnes is safe for now. But Potts-or-should-we-call-her-Stark—”

“Don’t you dare!” Pepper threatened, picking herself up off the floor.

“—evades the next throw and—wait, here comes Drew, but Romanoff and Danvers are closing in, Potts on backup, could it be—”

Bucky remembered bits and pieces of his army training as nightmarish, but decided in that instant that nothing in the army compared to Natasha and Carol Danvers, each armed with two dodge balls and grinning at him like lunatics.

“Ten bucks says they cream the new guy,” Tony declared from the bleachers.

“I don’t take bets I won’t win,” Phil replied, deadpan, and Bucky swallowed.

Three minutes later, as Bucky stretched out on the gym floor and downed the last few swallows out of his bottle of water, he glanced up to see Steve Rogers looming over him. Steve Rogers, blond and slightly sweat-sticky, his broad shoulders blocking out the glare from the bright overhead gym lights. Bucky forgot momentarily how to swallow and nearly choked on a mouthful of water.

“Good game,” he said, and stretched out a hand.

“Thanks,” Bucky replied. He gripped Steve’s wrist and let the other man hoist him up. He tried to ignore the way his arms flexed, but he was only human. Across the gym, Carol led her team in a rousing victory cheer. He rolled his eyes. “Sore winners,” he decided.

“Or you’re a sore loser,” Steve suggested. There was, however, something warm about it. Bucky pressed his lips together to stand on the smile. His other teammates were already in the bleachers, swapping bottles of water and planning strategy for their second-tier match against the kindergarten- and first-grade teachers. “We take this kind of seriously,” he added after a couple seconds.

Bucky gave up on holding down his grin. “I noticed.”

“Rogers!” Tony shouted. He stood on the sidelines, his hands cupped around his mouth. “Stop flirting, we have plans to hatch and bribes to collect!”

“Bribes?” Bucky echoed.

Steve shook his head. “Every year, Tony tries to pay Darcy to slip a couple extra balls into play.”

“It work?”

“Not so far.” He leaned in, almost conspiratorially. Bucky tried not to focus on things like sweaty t-shirts and personal space. “He doesn’t know you can pay her off in sci-fi post-it notes.”

“I’ll—keep that in mind,” Bucky replied dumbly, but then Steve grinned at him and trotted over to his team.

Just in time for Natasha to casually comment, “Do you need a neon sign?” from behind him.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Bucky turned around to face her. She looked like an ad for a no-show deodorant commercial: black tank-top, black sports bra, black capri-length yoga pants, black-and-red sneakers. Her curls were dark and damp with sweat. “Give it a rest,” he reminded her.

“He might as well send up smoke signals,” she retorted.

“I thought we agreed you’d drop it.

“Yeah, yesterday.” She necked her water bottle, shrugging. “New day, new harassment.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“I do.”

“You forget, I know your weakness,” he replied. She frowned at him, her face tightening as his lips curled into a smile. “The thing you hate more than anything else in the world.”

She scowled. “You wouldn’t,” she challenged.

“You wanna bet?”

“James, I am warning— Get the *hell* away from me, I swear—”

“Foul on the play!” Darcy’s voice carried through the gym, but Bucky was laughing too hard to really pay attention. Natasha’d darted away, but he’d given chase, taking off after her around the gym. It was the same game they’d played in college after long workouts at the campus rec center (Bucky to keep in shape for ROTC, Natasha to round out the workouts she was regularly getting with Alex): avoiding sweaty hugs. Because Bucky’d once thrown an arm around her after a run, and she’d nearly slugged him in her effort to get away from his sweat-drenched t-shirt and gym shorts.

She’d sworn to castrate him with a cafeteria spork if he’d ever tried that again. Naturally, he’d tried every chance he’d gotten.

Natasha bounded up the bleachers, two rows at a time, to the laughter of just about the entire staff, and Bucky grinned even as he almost tripped and fell on his face. He had missed this at his old school, the accidental camaraderie of being around people who *got* you. Of course, his old school lacked Natasha, her curls bobbing as she jumps off the third row and landed neatly on the gym floor.

Natasha, who’d understood him pretty much from the first time they met.

He followed, dropping down behind her while Darcy continued her running commentary—“I think I’ve seen dirty movies start this way, just with more sausage-related puns,” she announced, and Tony and Clint both immediately provided several on her behalf—but he knew immediately his mistake. Because Natasha snapped her fingers, and Bruce, seated on the lowest row of the next bleacher over—tossed her a dodge ball. When she caught it smoothly, she whirled back around.

“Take one more step,” she warned, holding it in her palm, “and I won’t be responsible for what happens next.”

Bucky grinned, slow and steady. “With witnesses?”

“We won’t watch,” Tony promised. He covered his eyes, then spread his fingers again. “Unless it’s getting dirty. Will it get dirty? ‘Cause if it does, we’ll totally watch, maybe just catch a few snippets on our cell phones and—”

“You have a one-track mind,” Pepper chided, sighing.

“Funny, you weren’t complaining about it yester— *Ow!* Pep! I need that kidney!”

Bucky laughed, or at least chuckled, but Natasha kept watching him. Even and menacing, her face a perfect mask of challenge. He had one, maybe two more steps before she flung the ball at him; if he didn’t dodge, he’d probably end up singing soprano.

“He’s calculating his next move, ladies and gents,” Darcy observed, her voice booming through the bullhorn. “Does he dare to eat a peach? Which is from a poem, I didn’t just make that up, but I’m just— Wait, hold on, Barnes gets an assist from—”

And Bucky missed Darcy’s next word, her crow of “Rogers!”, because he was busy watching Steve reach over Natasha’s shoulder and pluck the ball right out of her grip. His eyes met Bucky’s for a moment, and then he smiled.

“Go get her,” he encouraged.

Bucky’d never loved Natasha’s full-body shudder as much as he did at that instant.

Most of the staff ducked out on the lunch hour to change clothes or celebrate the victory of Clint’s team—“Third year running, bitches!” he announced in the parking lot, to which Tony returned, “Your husband threw the game for sex!”—which allowed Bucky precious time to work on his classroom. He stripped down to his sleeveless undershirt and swigged water as he worked, and the room started to perfectly materialize; he assembled the bare-bones of his work-display bulletin boards, hung the calendar, finished the desk nametags, wrote tomorrow’s agenda on the board. He washed up in the bathroom because he lived too far from school to comfortably make it to his apartment and back, and switched into a clean t-shirt he kept in the back of his car for after gym runs.

He was standing in the parking lot in his fresh t-shirt, just soaking up the late-summer rays, when Clint and Phil pulled up. Clint looked absolutely smug. “If you see Stark,” he said as he climbed out, “tell him we had lunch sex.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “We did not,” he assured Bucky, “have lunch sex.”

“Tony needs to think we had lunch sex.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and, without thinking, said, “Tony needs to spend a lot less time worrying about other people’s sex lives.”

Clint burst out laughing, an overflowing sound, and clapped Bucky on the shoulder. “I’d say it’s ‘cause he needs to get some, but we all know that’s a lie.”

“He practically charts it in Excel,” Phil added. He reached into the back of the car, and Clint released Bucky to grab the box he was hauling. When Bucky raised an eyebrow, he explained, “Donation books. We get a bunch every year from the local public libraries, or families whose kids’ve outgrown them.”

“And you put them in our library?” Bucky asked.

“Nah,” Clint replied. Phil grabbed a second box and then hip-checked the car door shut. “The ones

that aren't too bad get chunked at the age-appropriate classroom, or the resource room, or whatever. The rest we either cobble into a used book sale—"

"About once every two years," Phil clarified.

"—or just slip the kids who maybe don't have many books." A blind man couldn't miss the soft expression that crossed Clint's face, right then. Bucky definitely didn't. "We get a lot of families around here who need the extra support," he explained as they walked into the building together. "Single parents, retired grandparents who took in the kids, folks who work three jobs but can't make ends meet, you name it."

"Plus, the group home," Phil added. Bucky glanced at him. "There's a foster care group home about three miles down the road," he explained, gesturing over his shoulder with his chin. "They usually end up here."

Clint nodded. "Not always happily."

"I'd bet," Bucky said half-dumbly, and held open the door for the two of them.

He settled back into a routine in his classroom after that, checking and re-checking his preparations for the next day. His college friends had sometimes mocked him, called him anal-retentive or OCD, but he'd always taken being an educator seriously; if given the option between perfecting his curriculum or watching some Real Housewives show on TV, he'd always picked his curriculum. He sat down at his desk and started flipping through his plans for the first week, only occasionally lifting his head as other people returned to campus. Bruce waved as he trotted down the hall toward the kindergarten classrooms, Darcy'd hollered a, "Last call for this month's supply order!" down the hallway, and Steve—

Steve returned, butcher paper cart in tow, in a t-shirt that looked at least a size too small.

Bucky decided that he hated irrational crushes. He also decided to organize textbooks rather than plan his curriculum, his back to the door.

Which is why he didn't hear Natasha come in until she threatened, "I should murder you in your sleep," an hour or two later.

She'd changed over the lunch hour into fresh clothes, her curls frizzy from what Bucky could only assume was a hasty shower. She leaned her shoulder against his doorway while he rolled his eyes. "You probably still hide your spare key in the crack between the doorframe and the wall."

Bucky paused where he was stacking textbooks—reader, reading workbook, math book, math workbook, writer's workshop activity book, first quarter science project notebook—on a desk. "You knew about that?"

"How do you think I got in to water your plants that one time?"

"You watered my plants?"

She snorted at him. "Child," she criticized, but Bucky didn't miss how warm it was.

"Jerk," he retorted, and returned to stacking.

She let him work, blissfully silent for a few long minutes, until she asked, "Are you coming tonight?"

He stopped and turned around to look at her. “Coming?”

“Did you get the ‘invitation’?” The air quotes only added to the snide twist at the end of her voice. When he shook his head, she rolled her eyes. “Start checking your office box. Clint printed out a bunch of Comic Sans ‘invitations’ to Xavier’s tonight. Victory drinks, the first two pitchers on he and Phil.”

“Isn’t Xavier’s that terrible dive bar?”

“And a staff favorite.” When Bucky glanced up from the books again, Carol loomed in the doorway next to Natasha. Her blonde hair was wild, like a banshee’s. Bucky determined right then that he’d be working to stay in on her good side. “We always buy for the new guys. And then drink them under the table.”

“Sounds promising,” Bucky returned dryly.

“Sounds like the best fun you’re going to have until Stark’s Halloween party and his obscure pumpkin beer.” Carol planted a hand on the other side of the doorway, just above Natasha’s shoulder. Like a dare, almost. “So, you’re coming?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Carol frowned. “Your friend is shy,” she informed Natasha. “We chew up and spit out shy.”

Natasha nodded. “Tell me about it.”

“I’m still right here.”

“Then come,” Natasha pressed. When he met her eyes, she mouthed *new year, new you*. He ground his teeth together to keep from reminding her to drop the entire . . . *thing*. “Show them how well you hold your liquor. Maybe you can out-drink Steve.”

“Out-what me?” Steve called from across the hall.

Carol’s whole face lit up. “Come over here!” she called, and the only thing that Bucky hated more than her gleeful dart across the hall was Natasha’s knowing little smirk as she moved properly into his classroom and went to sit on his desk.

Bucky sighed and dropped his eyes to the books he was trying to organize, but he knew in his heart it was too late. Steve’s stumbling apology and question about what was going on carried into the room, and his stomach twisted. An almost-crush was bad enough without the whole thing turning into—

“Bucky doesn’t want to come to Xavier’s,” Carol reported, her voice carrying from the doorway, “but we want him to prove he can out-drink you.”

—this.

“He probably can,” Steve replied. It sounded almost self-deprecating. Bucky glanced up from the books for what felt like the fifth time and promptly wished he hadn’t. Because Steve’s tight shirt with Steve’s worn jeans were honestly a crime against humanity. He forced himself to actually meet Steve’s eyes, and Steve smiled. “They’re convinced I’m a heavy-weight drinker,” he explained.

“Because he *is*,” Carol stressed. She spread out her hands like some kind of ring-leader. At the

desk, Natasha grinned. “Did you tell him about the vodka incident?”

“Nope,” Natasha returned in the same beat Bucky asked, “What vodka incident?” and Steve *groaned* and turned beet red.

“You have to hear about the vodka incident,” Carol pressed. “Because that’ll make the whole thing clear, why you have to prove yourself to us and why we all think Steve’s got a liver made of—”

“Anybody seen Coulson?” another voice chimed in. Steve stepped out of the doorway to reveal Tony Stark. Tony Stark in a tank top that showed off a lot of arms and shoulders, actually. For the first time, Bucky saw just a tiny bit of the appeal. Emphasis, of course, on *tiny*. “C’mon, the guy’s MIA, one of you’ve *got* to have seen him.”

Natasha put down the pen she’d picked up from Bucky’s desk and frowned at him. “Why?”

“I need someone to tell him that me and Pep had lunch sex.”

Bucky frowned. “I think I’m supposed to tell you that he and Clint had lunch sex,” he responded.

Carol cackled, Steve smiled and dipped his head, and Natasha rolled her eyes. Tony’s face narrowed into a razor-sharp glare. Bucky resisted the urge to back up a half-step. “He said that, did he?”

“Clint said it. I think Phil said they didn’t have lunch sex.”

“So did they or didn’t they?”

“You’ve met them,” Natasha pointed out. “Assume they did.”

“But that lacks *detail*. I need *de*—”

“Is it normal for him to worry so much about other people’s sex lives?” Bucky asked no one in particular.

“Yes,” Carol and Steve both answered.

“It’s not *worry*,” Tony corrected. He stepped into the room, his wind-milling gestures almost propelling him between Carol and Steve’s shoulders. When he smacked into Carol, she slapped his arm hard enough that the skin-on-skin sound echoed. Tony barely flinched. “It’s a contest.”

Natasha sighed. “Here we go,” she intoned.

“Long ago,” Tony explained, coming all the way into the room and, eventually, looping an unwelcome arm around Bucky’s shoulder, “they were the reigning couple. The king and queen of all things filthy.”

Bucky attempted to shrug him off or twist away, but with no effect. Eventually, he just went ahead and glanced at him. “Which one was the queen?”

“Clint,” Natasha answered.

“But now, they have healthy competition. Healthy, *virile* competition, if I may be so bold. Healthy, *virile* competition with plenty of free time and encyclopedic knowledge of every supply closet in —”

“If this is where the conversation is headed,” Steve interrupted, holding up his hands, “I’m going

back to my classroom. I have work to do, and I don't want to think about the art supply closet being—" He half-shuddered, and Bucky bit down on a grin.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Wuss," he returned. Then, he paused, glancing between Natasha, Carol, and Steve. Bucky watched his attention flit from person to person, but worse, he watched his expression grow increasingly suspicious. His eyebrows tightened. His lips creased into a smile. "Did I miss something?" he asked.

"Always," Natasha responded.

Carol snorted a half-laugh and shook her head. "The new guy doesn't want to go to Xavier's," she tattled. Bucky resisted a groan and ducked out of Tony's grip. He gathered up the stack of readers he'd been working through and moved to the next pod of desks. It didn't matter, though; he felt every one of their gazes on his back, Tony's especially. "We can't figure out if he's shy, or a lightweight, or *what*."

"I've seen him drink," Natasha offered. Bucky wished he'd amassed more Natasha-related blackmail on her years ago. "Not a lightweight."

"Then why not?" Tony demanded. "This is— Okay. Know when you were in fifth grade and went on outdoor education or whatever? With trust falls and ropes courses and low-tech geocaching? That's just like this, but with crappy booze and at least one sixty-year old in fishnets and—"

"Tony."

It was funny, in a way, how Steve's voice could sound stern and steady, almost like a parent chiding a child. Bucky twisted around to see Steve standing in the doorway, hands on his hips and eyes trained in on Tony like blue lasers. Tony blinked, frowned, and clapped his mouth shut.

"If he doesn't want to go," Steve said simply, "he doesn't have to. Especially not when tomorrow's his first day. Give him some—slack, or space. *Something*."

For a moment, Tony didn't move. He narrowed his eyes at Steve, waited for his hands to unball from his hips, and, when that didn't work, rolled his eyes. "Boy Scout," he accused.

"Bully," Steve replied, but Bucky thought he detected a hint of warmth. "Let it go."

"Whatever." Tony tossed up his hands and shook his head. "Labor Day party, though, he better be there. Halloween, too. Turkey Day, Non-Denominational Winter Holiday, New Year's Eve, Martin Luther—"

"I get it," Bucky assured him. He set the readers down on the nearest desk and turned to force a tight smile at Tony. Tony, not Steve, because he didn't trust himself to look at Steve without staring. He forced his eyes straight ahead. "Next party, I promise. I just want to be ready for tomorrow."

Tony shook his head. "Your work ethic is disgusting." But he crossed the classroom anyway. For a couple seconds, Bucky thought he noticed Tony mouthing something in Steve's direction, and Steve frowning in response; but the whole exchange took such a short period of time, he figured he was just hallucinating things. "If you see Coulson—"

"We know," Bucky, Steve, Carol, and Natasha *all* provided, and Tony finger-waved as he let himself out of the room.

Steve and Carol followed, arguing half-heartedly about whether Steve was coming—"You only

live once,” Carol informed him, to which Steve replied, “And that’s why I avoid Xavier’s”—while Natasha stayed firmly rooted on Bucky’s desk.

He resumed stacking books, but felt her eyes on his back the whole time. When he reached the last pod, he sighed. “What?” he asked without looking at her.

“You’re bad at resolutions.”

“And you’re bad at dropping things.”

“Twenty bucks said he’d come if you came.”

“Twenty bucks says you won’t find out because I have too much to do.” When he glanced over his shoulder, Natasha was standing only a few feet away from him, hands in her back pockets. He recognized her even, too-intense stare. He’d seen it a thousand times in college, and might just see it a thousand more times, bossing around students during gym class. “Really,” he promised. “I just have a lot to do.”

“Really,” she echoes.

“Really.”

They stood like that for full seconds, separated by an arm’s length and staring one another down, until Natasha sighed and shook her head. “James, you are the only person I know who’s afraid to be happy.”

He rolled his eyes. “This from you.”

“Yes,” she answered. He frowned at the coolness in her voice. “This from me.”

He considered asking what she meant—he didn’t *know*, that was for sure—but she turned on her heel too quickly and strode smoothly out of the classroom, leaving him alone.

“You’ll get used to them,” Steve informed in the hallway that night.

The school closed down officially at about five p.m., but Bucky lingered. He’d tried not to dwell on the conversation with Natasha and the “invitation” to Xavier’s that he’d found in his box, and he’d done a pretty good job of it. When he’d heard voices in the hallway around five-fifteen, he’d just shut his door and kept on working. He’d scrubbed down the countertop, he’d rearranged desks one last time, he’d run through a few lesson plans in his head. If anyone had noticed his absence, they hadn’t said anything. Not even Natasha stopped by.

The hallway’d gone dark, and then the outside world, pitching into night before Bucky was really done working. Eventually, he’d abandoned his obsessive pre-planning—no amount of prep really could replace the thrown-to-the-wolves feeling of the first day, he knew—and packed up, leaving his classroom dark and empty.

Except when he stepped into the hallway, Steve Rogers was there, a messenger bag across his too-broad chest and a smile on his face.

“I’m pretty sure they can’t be worse than Natasha,” Bucky joked lightly. He fished out his keys

and locked his classroom door, acutely aware that Steve was close, and watching him. He wasn't sure why he thought he could *feel* those eyes on him, but he did; he wasn't sure why Steve's proximity made his skin itch, but it did, too. "She's pretty much beaten me down into putty already."

Steve laughed, loud and warm. "You don't know Carol well enough, then."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

The crooked little twist to the end of Steve's grin made Bucky grin back at him. He threw his own bag over his shoulder and tried to think of a conversation-starter, but words sort of—failed. He stood there, instead, like a clueless lump, until he said, "You're not at Xavier's."

"What? Oh, no." Steve shook his head and cast his eyes at the floor. "I'm like you. I want to make sure everything's right for the first day. It's—stupid, maybe, since I've done the same thing for the last couple years in a row, but it's important to me."

"To have it right?"

"To make sure the kids feel welcome." There was something shy in his smile as they started walking down the hall together. Bucky stood on the warm feeling that pooled in his stomach. He wondered if he could blame it on hunger. "We get a lot of kids that kind of look at school as their safe space. I like to make sure it fits the bill."

Bucky nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"You do?"

"Sure. I mean, home wasn't always my favorite place when I was a kid." He shrugged as they stepped into the foyer. Darcy'd spent the day putting up bulletin boards with important dates and student birthdays. He glanced at the "History of Labor Day" section of the board, instead of at Steve. "I think a lot of good happens when a teacher cares."

When he glanced over at Steve, he caught him smiling. "Natasha said that's part of why you came here."

He blinked. "Natasha said that?"

"It took some cajoling by Tony to get it out of her, but yeah. It was the selling point, really, how much you care."

The cool evening air rushed around them as they pushed out through the school's front doors, but Bucky was pretty sure that wasn't why his face suddenly felt too warm. His car was the only one left in the parking lot other than an older-model sedan that looked like it'd seen better days. Steve's, he thought to himself, and couldn't help his smile.

"Don't trust too much Natasha told you," he warned as they stepped off the curb and into the parking lot. "She still thinks my name is James."

Steve grinned. "I thought of you as a James until you got here," he admitted, "but I think Bucky suits you better. Even if it annoys Natasha."

"Annoying Natasha is half the appeal," Bucky joked, and Steve laughed. It was warm and full, a

laugh that almost overtook him, and Bucky—

Bucky stepped on the urge to laugh along with him or, worse, tell him exactly how *attractive* he was. Because in the parking lot lights, his hair shone golden blond and the shadows emphasized his smile.

New year, new Bucky Barnes.

In baby steps, maybe.

“Get some rest tonight,” he said suddenly, and Bucky blinked. They stood in the middle of the parking lot, almost equidistant between their cars. “Tomorrow’ll be a whirlwind.”

Bucky snorted. “No kidding.”

“In a good way.” Steve chuckled a little, almost to himself, and then dipped his head. “Don’t laugh, but I think about it a little like *The Wizard of Oz*. The tornado sweeps through, destroys everything, but it’s for the best.”

“You like *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“It’s a classic.”

“It’s *The Wizard of Oz*. I haven’t seen that crap since I was ten or something.”

“Then you should see it again. It’s different when you’re older.” Steve paused for a half-second, his eyes trained on Bucky. “I’ll have you over sometime, and we’ll watch it. You’ll see.”

Bucky swallowed and tried to ignore how thick his throat felt. He should’ve come up with a retort, some sort of cutting comment, but all he could think to say was, “Sure.”

Steve’s smile was genuine and too-warm, the kind of smile that pooled in Bucky’s gut. He let out a half-shaky breath and waited for the other shoe to drop, the great big *or I’ll lend you the DVD* caveat. None came. Instead, Steve reached out, patted him on the upper arm, and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Definitely,” Bucky replied. But he stood there, in the middle of the parking lot, and watched Steve’s back retreat, then watched the muscles in his shoulders move as he peeled off his bag and climbed into the car.

New year, new school, new life.

New everything.

At least, maybe.

First Day

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we cover the first day of the school year. the_wordbutler and I show you our teachers in action, as well as introduce you to some of their awesome (and not so awesome) students.

"First day of school! First day of school!" The shouts from the young girl came in time with her rhythmic jumping on her parents' bed.

"Some has seen the quest to find young Nemo a few too many times, I fear," Thor mumbled before bolting upright in bed and grabbing his youngest child and only daughter in his massive arms. He pulled her tight against his broad chest and laid back down. "Five more minutes, Alva. Then we'll start getting ready."

The four-year-old squirmed to escape her father's grasp to no avail. "No, Papa, you promised. It is seven-oh-oh. It is time. To. Get. Up." Each of the last four words was punctuated with a tiny swinging fist to her father's arms.

"Quit hitting your father," Jane ordered, her face turned away and still half-buried into her pillow.

Thor smiled and extended his arm to run his hand over Jane's left hip before giving it a pat. "Rise and shine, love."

"Coffee."

"Yes, yes. Coffee will be brewed shortly," he promised as he leaned over to kiss the back of her head. "Come, you," he said to Alva as he once again tightened his grip around his daughter. "What should you wear on your first day of school?" he asked as he moved from the master bedroom to the small pink one at the end of the hall.

"Mama laid out my clothes last night," Alva answered as she pushed light brown hair out of her eyes.

"Don't dress them before they eat!" Jane shouted from the bedroom. "I'm not dealing with stains on new clothes on the first day," she explained as she emerged into the hallway. "And I guess I'm making my own coffee."

Thor fought the smile that threatened to shine on his face at the familiar line spoken most mornings. He knew Jane loved him fiercely and that he was a man of great accomplishments, but he would never be quick enough at supplying coffee for his beloved.

"Boys!" he bellowed at the other bedroom remaining in the upstairs hall. "Waffles!"

Goran, usually called George, poked his head out into the hallway. "I want Pop-Tarts."

Thor shook his head. "Not on a school day. You know the rules."

The six-year-old's face fell, but he made his way down to the kitchen regardless. Thor left the

bedroom of all things pink to move to the room his two sons shared. "Henry," he called to his oldest—whose first name was technically Henrik—as he leaned into the room. "Arise, my son."

A hand slid out from under the covers and slowly pulled the sheets away from the eight-year-old's face. "Can't it be summer for one more day?"

Thor chuckled. "Afraid not. Out of bed, my boy."

Five minutes later, the kitchen was chaos—which was typical for a morning (or any time of the day really) in the Odinson home. Jane and Thor were debating over a proper breakfast since Jane thought Thor's notion of waffles should be replaced with scrambled eggs. Alva was pantomiming a race with Rainbow Dash and Apple Jack on the kitchen table and providing a loud commentary about who was currently in the lead that no one was listening to. Henry and George were running laps around the main floor of the home because Henry had taken George's favorite Hot Wheels and was refusing to give it back, so naturally George had to chase him screaming "It's mine!" And the chaos continued until there was a thud, two seconds of silence, and loud (fake) cries from George and a shout of "It wasn't my fault!" from Henry.

Jane rolled her eyes. "Goran Tomas and Henrik Theodor—in here. Now." As she waited for the boys to make their way into the kitchen, her gaze followed her daughter's trajectory towards the pantry. "Alva, if you dump another canister of oatmeal all over my kitchen table, I'm taking the money to replace it out of your allowance."

"But, Mama, my horsies need to eat oats for breakfast."

Thor bit the inside of his cheek to fight a smile before he clamped down on his amusement. "Young lady, are you talking back to your mother?"

The young girl heaved a great sigh and cast her eyes down to the ground. "I'm sorry."

"Pick up your toys, we're going to eat soon," Thor told her.

As she rushed off to gather up her plastic horses, the boys walked into the kitchen both with matching looks of forced remorse on their faces. Thor knew better than to step into this conversation, so he decided on focusing his efforts on cooking scrambled eggs for the five of them. No sense in furthering his argument with Jane, especially when the rest of the men in the house were about to get into trouble.

"Boys, do you really want to be punished before your first day of school?" Thor heard both of them inhale to begin spinning tales of how nothing was their fault when Jane must have shot them both looks that silenced them in fear. "I didn't think so. Get out plates and forks for everyone, and if I hear anything other than nice words or manners coming out of your mouth, I'm hiding the Wii for a week."

An hour later, their stomachs were full and everyone was dressed (complete with socks that matched—an effort usually only reserved for important days). Thor corralled the young ones out onto the front porch for the mandatory First Day of School Picture.

Jane snapped a couple dozen on their DSLR while Thor clicked a few on his phone. The best image (the one where Jane allowed them to make silly faces) was immediately promoted as the new wallpaper for his cell and would be promptly shown to anyone and everyone at his office and any construction site he visited for the next week.

The children rushed to the sidewalk to await the bus. It came a few minutes later, and Thor waved

goodbye to his kids. He heard Jane sniffing at his side and looked down in concern. "What is the matter?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "I feel like we just brought them home, like they should still just be newborns. And now they're off to school. All three of them."

He gathered her into a hug and pulled her against the front of his body. "They are growing up rather quickly."

"C'mon, Bird, let's go outside," said Clint from the kitchen.

Phil yelled back as he stood in front of the full-length mirror in their bedroom, "I already took her out," as he finished knotting his tie before making his way out to the living room.

"Oh, okay. Hey, have you seen my folders?"

"Already in your bag."

"Great. And my car keys?"

Phil choked back a laugh as he reached the living room to find Clint on the verge of tearing apart their sofa. Birdie, their bulldog, glared at the younger man from her end of the couch for threatening to disturb her peace. "No need to destroy the house, we'll just take my car."

"Okay," Clint said, distraction evident in his voice and on his face. "You still have my classroom key on your ring, right?"

"Of course. How many cups of coffee have you drank already?"

"Three."

"Were they actual cups or straight out of the pot?"

Clint's response was to give the same smile kids beam when their hands are caught in the cookie jar by a parent and they're trying to look as adorable as possible.

Phil rolled his eyes and reached out to snag Clint by the tie and yank him closer for a quick kiss. "You're cut off."

"Hey, watch the tie. I don't want you to wrinkle it."

"No fair stealing my lines," Phil quipped as he released the narrow strip of black material and smoothed it down the front of Clint's chest. Phil took a step back and shook his head. "Only you could make a short sleeved dress shirt look that good."

Clint gave a smug smile and quick flex of his biceps. "I defy the laws of fashion."

"Most of the time not in a good way. You ready?"

Clint looked over the room as he verbalized all he needed. "Bag's by the door, you've got our lunches, Bird's got food. I think so."

"Then let's get another school year started."

Clint nodded with an excited grin. "Sounds good to me. Birdie—no parties while we're gone," he

ordered with an index finger flung in the dog's direction. Her response to was to sigh and roll over in order to commence a mid-morning nap.

They made the ten minute drive to school in silence (save for Clint beating out the rhythm of whatever song was stuck in his head on the dashboard), both of them reviewing their mental task list. Some items on Phil's included but were not limited to being out in front of the school on time for bus duty, as well as hanging large posters on his two entrances to the library that told the students they wouldn't be able to check out books yet. Odds were he'd still get kids coming in and asking anyway, but really who could get too upset about that?

The couple walked into the office and greeted Darcy, who was just settling in. They signed in on the time sheet, checked their mailboxes, and Phil walked Clint to his classroom down the hall from his library. "Need anything else?" Phil asked as he unlocked the door.

"Nah, I think I got it. Thanks, though. When's planning for you today?"

Phil paused to think in order to confirm his answer. Since they were five specials teachers but only four classes per grade, planning periods shifted every day for the arts and humanities teachers. This was a Wednesday, which meant Phil would be free when everyone else was handling third graders. "Right before your lunch," he answered.

Clint nodded. "Don't steal my food. It's fish sandwich day in the cafeteria, and you know how I feel about that."

Phil shook his head. "I can't believe that's the only thing you refuse to eat from the cafeteria. I can't even look at that food without getting indigestion."

"That's because you're old."

"I can still outrun your ass," Phil challenged.

Clint laughed. "Don't insult my ass, I know how much you love it."

"It is the main reason I married you. Also, your cooking. That's about it."

"If you two are done flirting, I have actual work things I'd like to discuss with Clint," Carol said from behind them.

"Never, Carol. We are never done flirting," Clint returned.

Whatever retort Carol had on her tongue was interrupted by Jessica Cage flying out of her room and bolting for the nearest restroom. "Morning sickness," Carol said with a note of sympathy.

Phil clapped his hand on Clint's shoulder. "Good luck with that."

"Yeah," Clint agreed with as sigh before snagging one of Phil's belt loops and pulling him in for a quick kiss. "Have a good day."

"You too."

Carol Danvers was not a person to mess with ever, but especially not at the beginning or end of the school year. The first week was spent with her running around like a crazy person making sure paperwork was up to snuff, contacting parents and reassuring their fears, getting to know her new kids, and evaluating where everyone was after a couple of months off for summer. But she had

four years of Air Force experience to teach her how to beat the chaos and busyness into submission.

She had four pull-outs in fifth grade and six in fourth. Her goal was to have both of those numbers lowered by the end of the year. Carol was never one to deny help to a student who needed it, but she was bound and determined to get the kids off of services if they were ready for it before transitioning to middle school.

Her fifth graders were excited to see her again. She waved to a student in Clint's class, Jack, who was downgraded from an Individualized Education Plan to a 504 at the end of last year and wouldn't need to go with her for specialized instruction in her oversized closet of a classroom with the rest of her pull-outs.

She only had two students who were new to the elementary school. One of the transfers, Anna, was a fifth grader, and as Carol was looking over her paperwork her eyes caught on Anna's classroom teacher from last year: James Barnes.

Carol made her way downstairs to the floor used for the younger half of the school and knocked on Bucky's door before the students arrived. He was staring at his desks and jumped a little at the noise. "Sorry," she apologized. "Didn't mean to scare you."

He shook his head. "Not your fault my mind is going a million directions. What's up?"

Carol held out the paperwork she had in her hand. "One of my new kids was yours last year."

Bucky took the papers, and his eyebrows knit together while his lips pursed into a thin line. "She transferred here?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It means she went back to living with her Dad. When I had her, she was living with her grandparents."

"Is her Dad trouble?"

Bucky shook his head. "He's not bad, per se. Anna just felt more taken care of with her grandparents. She's a super sweet kid, but really shy and has some anxiety problems stemming from when her Mom was sick and passed away. If she has any issues, feel free to send her down to me. She might want a familiar face. I'll email the fifth grade teachers and tell them the same thing."

Carol smiled. "Thanks, I'll do that."

Bucky got to school at seven-thirty that morning, an hour before his contract deemed mandatory. He was proud of himself for holding off that long. He never had issues with running late on the first official day of school (any other day was a different story) because, like most people in the world, sleep refused to come easily for him the night before a new school year started.

He put his leftover pizza in the fridge, greeted Principal Fury—the only person in the office at that time of the morning—and gave a friendly smile to the janitorial crew who worked the early shift in the building because Bucky was smart enough to make friends with those responsible for helping him keep his room clean.

Once he had his bag settled in his room, he stood at the whiteboard with coffee in hand. He looked out over his desks and went over his seating chart three times in his head, making sure he knew

which name would be in each seat. After his chat with Carol, he ran copies for a review math and grammar worksheet to have his students work on when they came in.

A little after eight, Steve poked his head in. "You ready?"

"Probably not, but I don't think I'll get a choice in the matter."

He smiled. "I'm sure you'll be fine. Remember—right across the hall if you need anything."

Bucky smiled and nodded. He wasn't going to have a hard time forgetting that.

Before he knew it, kids were filing through his door. He stood just outside the entrance so he could shake hands and introduce himself with each of his students as they arrived while monitoring the hallway and issuing the typical "Don't run!" to the other kids on the way to their classrooms.

Bucky was grateful that the new and improved online gradebook also had last year's school pictures available so he could recognize his new kids on sight fairly accurately. One of his students, a Latina girl named Elena, walked up to him with a huge grin on her face and shiny black pigtails bouncing behind her. Bucky leaned down and extended his hand, and she shook it with a giggle before looking to her left and gasping in excitement. "We get to be across the hall from Mister Rogers? He's my favorite!" she announced before ducking inside the classroom.

Bucky's brain caught on how she addressed Steve and he had to bite back a laugh. In the last couple of days, Bucky didn't think about what the students called their art teacher. He looked up to see Steve coming down the hallway after bus duty and walking towards his classroom. Bucky gave him a big smile and greeted him with, "Good morning, Mister Rogers."

Steve rolled his eyes. "I wondered how long it'd take you to put that together. And for the record, I've heard every trolley joke known to man." He got a sparkle in his eye as he leaned in close. "Remind me to tell you about the time I stupidly opened a link from Tony that took me to a video of the royal puppets... doing adult things." Bucky laughed at the thought until Steve spoke again with a tone of concern in his voice. "Henry Odinson is standing in his chair."

Bucky's eyes shot back to his room to see that the boy was indeed standing in his chair, declaring himself king of the classroom. Bucky cursed himself for getting distracted and muttered a quick "Thanks" to Steve before stepping inside the room, hands on his hips. "Mister Odinson," he called loudly.

The boy turned slowly with a look of horror on his face. "You know my name already?"

Bucky gave him a shit-eating grin. "Yes. And I know your parents' names, too. And their phone numbers. Have a seat."

"Yes, sir."

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and germs," Darcy announced into the microphone at her desk, leaning heavily on her elbow. There were a lot of parts of her job she loved, really—the kids, the cool parents, the chances to yell at the not-cool parents, the hot teachers, the hot *student* teachers, the hot *substitute* teachers, the not-hot but still kind of awesome other teachers . . . Well, you got the idea. She could tally them up on a white board if she wanted to. But honestly, all those things considered, she still loved the announcements best.

Fury dropped off the sheet at her desk every morning, a neatly-printed list of things she might want to bring up, not that she ever needed to look at it. Nope, she knew the events at the school like the

back of her hand, and not just because she had administrative access to the website's calendar. She knew because it was her job to know; her one contribution to the well-oiled office machine.

That, and her awesome bulletin boards.

You should see her bulletin boards. If they gave bulletin board awards, she'd win.

Today's list included three upcoming events, that day's cafeteria menu, and a big, bold, triple-underlined mandate: *Don't go overboard, it's the first day of school.*

Guess which one of those she'd chosen to ignore.

"So, in case you've been living under a rock for the last, oh, three months—which, maybe you have, I don't know your summertime life," she addressed the school, her voice reverberating back into the office through the speakers, "we've got the first PTA meeting of the year scheduled for next Wednesday night. Tell your parents, because I'm certain none of you want to go. Also, next Thursday, the school board's featuring a back-to-school pizza bash. It's all-you-can eat, so if you're edging toward puberty, skip lunch. And remember: the first Friday in September is our open house. Flyers will go home tomorrow. Don't hoard them, actually deliver them, because otherwise your parents are going to call me and drive me *crazy*."

A class of first- or second-graders stopped in their parade past the office window on their way to gym, waving like maniacs. Darcy released the intercom button to wave back, just as excited.

Fury's head picked that second to pop out from around the doorjamb. "Aren't you in the middle of cracking up kids who are trying to learn?" he demanded. He almost sounded mad. Lucky Darcy knew he was a teddy bear.

"It's the first day," she retorted, screwing up her nose at him. "They're probably being reminded where the bathrooms are." She pressed the intercom button a second time. "Today's lunch is fish sandwiches and custard—no, sorry, fries, I lied about the custard—with your choice of milk and some kind of questionable fruit cocktail. The office is still taking your checks for the lunch program in case you were planning on pawning them off for baseball cards, so come on down." Bucky trailed past the window—ah, second-graders then, cool—and Darcy waved at him, too. "Come by and see me if you haven't already. Otherwise, these have been your morning announcements."

She released the intercom button with a sigh, only to find that Fury was still watching her. "Sir?" she asked, grinning.

"I either pay you way too much," he replied, shaking his head, "or way too little."

"Probably the second one," she returned, and laughed when he closed his door extra-hard.

The first day of school was by far always the quietest in the kindergarten rooms. Bruce simultaneously loved the peace while hating how much effort it took to drag answers and effort out of the shy kids. And then, there were always the criers. They were the ones who walked into his bright and colorful (and a bit messy) classroom with wide, wet eyes for the first week. He always did his best to kneel in front of them, making himself as small as possible and giving them a big, reassuring grin. "I promise you're going to have a great time at school. We're going to have such so much fun learning and making really cool things that you're not going to want to leave at the end of the day."

He could also always pick out the ones who were lucky enough to win a spot in the lottery for last

year's pre-kindergarten class. They acted like total professionals at attending school, bragging about how they knew all of the teachers in the building already, and were friends with Mrs. Parker the music teacher. Bruce would snicker into his hand about them if he didn't have to calm down a third of the class. His soft heart found it somewhat adorable that they freaked out so much about being away from home for a few hours, but he knew half of their parents were equally as nervous about their little ones going off to school, and that was a big part of why some of the kids are so worked up.

Once everyone finally had the backpacks that were too big for their small bodies hung on hooks along the wall, Bruce got them all seated on the square made on the floor. Each side was made with a different color of tape. First rule mentioned in the room: don't pick at the tape.

That was how the first week went: rules. And there were a lot to remember when you were six, so Bruce made sure to intersperse them with fun activities and ways to gauge prior knowledge on things like shapes, colors, letters, and numbers. After the first week, most of the kids would no longer be afraid or feel overwhelmed when it came to spending what feels like a good part of your day at school.

Once they spent the first week getting used to the new environment and the rules and routines that come with it, that was when Bruce got to have fun with curriculum. Beyond knowing which letter they would learn about that week, he pretty much left his lesson plans wide open. His six-year-olds had attention spans the length of a goldfish, and if they were going to ask a question during a discussion on the difference between circles, squares, and triangles and a student asked why the sky is blue, he might just turn things on a dime and throw in a little science because these kids were walking sponges. It was his goal to cram them with as much knowledge (making sure that the common core standards were covered, of course) as possible before sending them onto the wondrous world of first grade where you get to stay at school for the whole day. Whoa.

"Oh *hell* no."

Clint's classroom went pin-drop quiet when the words flew out of his mouth, and with good reason. Not just because swearing around the kids was pretty much against the first cardinal rule of *everything*—even Clint tried to avoid it, and his mouth was almost as filthy as Fury's—but because of the venom behind it. It caught Clint off guard, a little. He could count mostly on one hand the number of times he'd used *that* voice on the first day of school.

There was a reason, after all, that most kids didn't screw around in his class, and it wasn't just out of respect and mutual understanding (or whatever buzzwords you wanted to use). It was because he never hid where the line was and never hesitated to say when you'd barreled across it.

Abby—Abigail, technically, but Clint'd had both her older sisters and nobody ever called her by her full name—dropped her gaze onto her desk as soon as he said it, avoiding any kind of eye contact not only with him, but with the rest of the room. Not that it really mattered, because Clint was already clutching the note in his hand. It was crimped around the edges, roughly torn, and clearly read "FATSO" in big block letters. He flashed it to the class in a move that most teachers wouldn't've been able to pull off without embarrassing the kid it was directed at.

Except Clint knew his own face and eyes, knew how tight his whole *body* went at the stupid thing, and was absolutely certain not one of the kids would mistake this moment as an endorsement.

Most the kids averted their eyes immediately, focusing down on their spiral notebooks and the introductory project they were *supposed* to be working on. It was a guessing game kind of icebreaker, where each kid wrote persistently more obvious details about themselves 'til you could

guess who they were. It ended up funny, every time, and Clint got a chance to peek at their writing as he read out the clues in exaggerated accents.

But right now, nothing was funny. Not the way Abby swiped at her eyes before she picked up her pencil again, not the paper crackling as he balled it in his fist, not—

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flicker of activity. Colin Hill's head was down showing off a head of dark, wild spikes, but his hand was sticking out into the aisle. He leaned a couple extra inches, trying to set something on Natalie's desk.

Trying being the operative word, because Clint was a lot faster than any fifth grader and had it out of his grip in two seconds flat.

"Mister Barton!" Colin squeaked as Clint opened up the folded-up slip of paper. A slip that read *YOUR FACE LOOKS LIKE CHEESE* in the same handwriting as the first one, to be precise. He glanced down at Colin, who was suddenly furiously interested in his assignment.

"Hallway," Clint said tightly, balling up the new note.

"But—"

"Don't think that was a question." And it said a lot about the "legendary" Hill twins that the brother, Keith, snickered aloud. Clint turned to level a glance at the boy before it turned into full-out sibling torment—until he noticed that Keith was writing on a half-sheet of paper.

A sheet with rough edges.

"On second thought," he amended, and damn if Colin didn't look momentarily *relieved*, "let's have your brother tag along."

Keith's head jerked up as though he'd just seen a ghost. Clint gestured widely to the doorway, and then *waited*. Patience of steel was never included on the descriptions for teaching jobs, but you needed the stuff. You needed the ability to look a kid who was testing the waters in the eye and then, raise an eyebrow.

Which Clint did.

Keith pushed back his chair and stomped out the door, Colin immediately on his heels.

Clint nodded to himself and let them stew for a second, taking the long way around the room to check on the students' progress. He didn't need to. They all knew the rules, because they were pretty consistent through the grades: you work on your assignment, you read if you finish early, you ask for a bathroom pass before you bolt, that kind of thing. But he wanted to give them a bit of breathing space, to send Abby and Natalie both smiles before he followed the boys out into the hall.

"Five minutes, and then we'll see if you can stump your classmates," he called to the group as he propped the door open. A couple girls giggled and shared a whisper Clint was pretty sure had more to do about stumping *him* than anybody else.

In the hallway, Colin and Keith were both slumped against the opposite wall, eyes trained on the floor. They didn't look up when Clint crossed the threshold or when he crossed his arms; when he finally cleared his throat in way that reminded him more of somebody's grumped-out dad than himself, their heads snapped up in a twin motion. They were identical, more-or-less, dark hair and freckles everywhere, but Colin was a couple inches taller and Keith wore his hair Justin Bieber

shaggy. He spent a couple seconds watching them—not saying a word, not *yet*—before he opened his mouth.

He hardly formed a syllable before Keith blurted, "We're sorry."

Colin scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Wuss."

"Wuss?" his brother repeated, twisting around to stare at him. "Mom is going to kill you. And me. And you *again*, because—"

"Let's go with that," Clint interrupted, dropping his hands to his hips. "Because I was trying to decide whether you two thought name-calling by note was a good idea, and where you got it from, because it sure wasn't from your mom."

And Clint knew in that moment which brother he'd use to crack the other next time this happened, because all the color drained from Keith's face. "You know our mom?"

He nodded. "Personally shook her hand at the last district-wide meeting." He left out the part where it'd been a prelude to dragging his husband away from administrative geekery. "I got the impression she wouldn't be impressed by the notes."

The boys looked at each other. Colin frowned, and Keith elbowed him in the ribs. "No," he grumbled.

"Sorry?"

"No," he repeated, and his eyes flicked in Clint's direction. "She wouldn't."

"You sure? 'Cause I can save them and walk them over to the middle school at lunch if you—"

"We'll apologize," Keith offered. Colin grit his teeth and looked up at the ceiling. Clint'd seen that same exasperated *shut the fuck up* expression on Pepper's face about a thousand different times. "And we won't do it again."

"Today," Colin muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That's what I thought," Clint replied. He paused, leaving both boys to watch him for a couple seconds before he nodded to himself. "Here's how this is going to work," he said. His tone purposely left no room for argument. "You're both going to go in there and finish your clues. Then, at lunch, you're going to sit with me and write apology letters to those girls and anybody else you passed notes to."

"There wasn't anyone else," Colin protested. The problem was, he said it in the same breath that Keith said, "Okay." Clint quirked an eyebrow, and Colin looked back at the floor.

"And next time this happens, you're both going to spend your recesses in the library, helping Mr. Coulson with anything he needs." Which, actually, was probably a punishment for Phil, but if kids hated anything, it was the hard labor of wiping down library tables for a half-hour."

"But—"

Colin was silenced with a stony glance. "Agreed?" Clint asked, except it wasn't a question. They

both nodded. "Good."

He let them stomp back into the classroom in front of him, Colin elbowing Keith as he passed, managed to hold the eye-roll until they were both out of sight. The "tough" ones always required the most elbow grease at the beginning of the year—and always cried the hardest on the last day, when they had to say goodbye.

Principal Fury spent a couple of hours a day on lunch monitoring duty. Other teachers would rotate in, and some classroom teachers would even elect to eat with their students, which Fury was always happy to see. He patrolled the tables, making sure everyone had something to eat and telling the kids that no matter how much Vice-Principal Sitwell begged, they were not to give him any French Fries or tater-tots. He also made sure to stand by the open coolers to glare down any kid who made a move to grab for anything other than white milk. Just because the law required schools to offer the sugar-filled cartons of chocolate and strawberry milk didn't mean he couldn't dissuade his students from drinking them with a little non-verbal communication. Stark made fun of him for having a man crush on Jamie Oliver, and Fury was mostly okay with that.

Once the first day's round of lunches were over and he checked in on all of his lunch ladies, he went to roaming the hallways of the school. He made a point to stop in on all of the new people in his building on the first day. He'd pop in to all of the classrooms before the first week was over, if only for a couple of minutes, but the first day was reserved for the rookies on staff.

Fury saved Barnes for last because even though this was the man's first year in Fury's building, it was his fifth year teaching, so there shouldn't have been too much to stress over whether or not he was going to do a good job. Not that that was usually a problem for his staff members. Firstly, Fury wouldn't ever hire someone unless he was sure they could do the job well and inspire his students. Secondly, everyone knew what the economy was like and how many people out there would kill a hobo to get a position as a full-time elementary teacher.

He walked into the second-grade classroom and did his best to stay out of the way. When a couple of the kids did more than just take a quick glance to see who the visitor was and ended up staring at him for a minute, he raised an eyebrow and pointed to the paper on their desk until they got the message of where their attention should be focused.

At the moment, the students were working on a filling in a graphic organizer to help them write a journal piece on things they saw, smelled, tasted, felt, and heard over summer vacation. Fury took a moment to let his gaze roam around the room's setup, noting the neat bookshelves and the poster made up of different colors with clothes pins attached to it showing where each student was behavior-wise for that day. He was not surprised to see the Odinson boy being the only miscreant so far.

His eye then turned to the students. There was a small, blonde girl wearing an iCarly shirt working nearby. He crouched down beside her and asked her about her answers. She shyly answered all his questions and said, "Thank you, sir," when he complimented her on her hard work. He leaned in and told her, "My name is Mister Fury, not Sir," and added a wink to the end of the statement.

This caused her little face to crinkle in concern. "I'm not sure you should wink, Mister Fury. Because then you won't be able to see out of either eye. And then you'd be blind. And then you'd have to get a dog that sees for you, and then you couldn't talk to me because I'm allergic to dogs."

Fury swallowed his laughter. "I will keep that in mind. Wouldn't want to miss out on conversations with someone like you, now would I?"

Along with bus duty at the beginning and end of the day, the specials teachers also monitored recess for the first through fifth graders for the three thirty-minute sessions the kids were divided between in the middle of the school schedule. May Parker usually took up post by the entrance back into school and handled letting kids who fell and needed to see the nurse in for band-aids. Tony manned the kickball field, where he changed the rules of the game daily. Steve took on at least thirty students at once every day in a game of basketball. Phil stood in the middle of the playground keeping tabs on everything around him and pointing out ways kids are breaking the rules. He was also the one who monitored The Line—a spray-painted segment of asphalt where misbehaved students had to stand for five or ten minutes at the start of recess as punishment.

Natasha walked the perimeter the whole time. She flitted from group to group and saw how they were doing. She politely accepted gifts of flowery weeds or rocks that looked like a certain animal when held at the correct angle. But mostly, she listened.

It was how she knew before most people in the school that so-and-so's parents were fighting, that this student's grandmother's cancer came back, or that another student was going to have a baby brother or sister. She catalogued each bit into her steel trap memory, filing it away for herself or to pass on to their classroom teacher or even Pepper if necessary.

The other thing she did while she prowled the playground is to appreciate where she was. When she was the age of her students, she was living in the Motherland at the end of the Soviet Union's reign. There weren't too many times she got to go screaming and running around a sprawling playground in the sunshine. She moved to the States when communism fell, but even then, she didn't get much time to be a kid. Her mother died shortly after they made it to America, and her father didn't know how to raise her so she was sent off to live at a gymnastics training facility.

So that was why, when a group of girls walked up to her and whined about being bored, she would huff and try desperately not to roll her eyes: because they had no idea what they were talking about. "Go run around while you can," was her usual response. She knew they thought she was referring to the fact that recess was almost over and they'd have to go back inside soon, but it was actually because she wanted to them to be children for as long as possible.

Pepper, like everyone else in the school, was consumed with busyness the entire month of August. She spent her days helping Darcy organize transcripts coming in and going out of the school office for students who were moving, relaying messages from the board about state assessment updates, coordinating with the Special Education teachers about their students, helping with the school supply donation drive for parents who couldn't afford to buy things for their kids, and what was always the hardest part: compiling a list of students who had a hard summer.

Every year, she hoped that list would be unnecessary, but she never got her wish. This year, there were a couple dozen kids whose parents went through a divorce, two sisters whose mom was still bedridden from a car accident back in April, a second grader whose dad left on a business trip and never came back, and a handful of other kids whose parents or grandparents were fighting serious illnesses.

Pepper did her best to see every one of them one-on-one during the first week of school. She was always roaming the halls whenever it was time to change classes for specials, because it was an easy way to get a quick look at them without taking them out of their classroom. If she did have to pull them, she tried her best to work around the teacher's schedule so they weren't missing a new concept in math or going through this week's spelling list.

At times, she would pull students from specials. She usually tried to grab them when they were in Tony's class because he could never (successfully) fight her on why they should stay in there. He'd

huff and puff and the kids would snicker all around them because even though their last names are different, they all knew they were married because there were zero secrets in an elementary school. Once Tony was done with the obligatory foot stomping, he'd let the kid go and proclaim how jealous he was that they get to spend some one-on-one time with her. "Will that be all, Miss Potts?" he asked every time.

"That will be all, Mister Stark."

"The laughing about poop jokes stops after a couple days, right?"

Steve was not exactly sure why his heart jumped into his throat when he heard James's—Bucky's—voice at his classroom doorway, but he immediately shamed it for being an unreliable traitor. He planned on spending his off period cleaning up colored pencils from the third graders' introductory project (creating a color wheel with extra intermediary colors based on how hard you shaded). He knew that Bucky's students would be at gym with Miss Romanoff at this time, but knowing and expecting are two different things.

Not, of course, that he checked the schedule. No, that would be creepy, and Tony would mock him.

But he swallowed around the weight of his heart, smiled, and shook his head. "Probably not," he admitted. Bucky groaned. "I mean, the back-to-school delight of horrifying the girls in the class'll probably die down in a week," he offered with a shrug, "but then you're moving into fart-noise territory."

He laughed when Bucky lightly thumped his head against the doorjamb. "The Odinson kid turned every sentence out of my mouth into bodily functions," he lamented. Steve tried to hide his grin by ducking to fetch some pencils from under the table. "His nickname for Ernesto Piña is—"

"Captain Fartbrains. I know. Just wait 'till you see him with his brother."

"Which one? Fartbrains, or—"

"Henry." Steve strained to grab the last pencil from under the table leg and then started crawling out. "It's like oil and water, the way those two fight."

He expected Bucky to stay safely at the door, moaning about his fate. So it really wasn't any surprise (to Steve, at least) that he nailed his head on the lip of the table when he realized Bucky's shoes were literally a foot away from him—and that coming up to his knees would put him face-to-face with Bucky's belt buckle. He swore under his breath.

Bucky laughed. "Careful, buddy. Don't think the fifth grade girls'd forgive me if I broke their Mister Rogers."

"Don't," Steve grumbled, climbing to his feet. He rubbed the back of his head with a hand.

"Don't blame me. I heard them in the hallways. You're cuter than last year, according to a couple of them."

"That's disturbing."

"Just calling it like I see it, Cap'n Clumsy."

"I'll start Henry Odinson on paints come Monday if you're not careful," Steve threatened, and

Bucky burst out laughing. His laughter felt warm in a familiar way, like a sound you're used to hearing, and Steve quietly hated what it did to his still-traitorous heart. He dropped the lost pencils in a coffee can and accepted the handful Bucky'd collected from around the room. "You're used to older kids, though, right?"

"Fourth graders, yeah. I mean, these ones aren't bad," Bucky added, "but they're . . . young, I guess. A lot more cat-herding than teaching, it feels like."

"Bucky, it's the first day." Steve smiled, but felt instantly stupid for it; Bucky's brow tightened and his lips creased into a frown. "The younger they get, the more you're one part teacher, one part parent. They don't just need you to teach them their spelling words, they need you to help them figure out how to stand in line without bouncing all over the place and how to recover after their first 'girlfriend' breaks up with them." And at least Bucky smiled at his air quotes. "You've got twenty-two *kids*. Congratulations."

Bucky snorted and rolled his eyes. "And here's me, telling my folks I'm not in a hurry to settle down and have children."

"Tell them they're grandparents to the power of— Well, I'm not a math teacher. Some kind of power."

"And you're paying for all the hospital bills when they have heart attacks?" Bucky joked, and Steve laughed. He moved through the room, collecting the last handfuls of pencils. He tried not to find it surprising that Bucky trailed after him. "I guess I'm just used to them having a little more in the way of attention spans. Plus, I don't know, kids are just these sponges, I guess. I want them to soak up as much as possible as *soon* as possible, to make sure they're ready to keep going forward —"

"And you think you're not already doing that?" Steve interrupted. "Look, Buck, you've just got to let it happen, okay? New school year, new teacher, they're going to be a little wound up. It's not like when they've got older siblings or cousins who know legendary Mister Barnes and are in endless awe over you." Bucky rolled his eyes, and Steve smiled. "Give it to the end of next week. Eight school days. And if you still feel like you're herding cats, I'll buy you a beer."

"I'm not getting out of this, am I?"

"Well, according to Tony, I'm a pushover, but the answer's still probably no."

"Fine," Bucky agreed, and held up his hands. Steve laughed a little as he backed toward the door. "It better be pretty good beer for eight days of cat-herding."

"I'll spring for Bud Platinum, or whatever that stuff is."

"Jesus, if that's all I get, it might be worth lying." Bucky paused in the doorway, his hands resting on its wood frame. "And 'Buck'?"

Steve frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," he replied, but something in his crooked grin suggested otherwise. Steve raised an eyebrow in his direction. "I just don't remember the last time somebody called me Buck."

Steve's mouth opened, a flimsy attempt at some kind of comeback, but by the time he remembered how to make sounds, Bucky'd already gone.

"We're going over this exactly once. Got it? One time, then I adopt a zero tolerance policy and—Okay, first step, who knows what a zero tolerance policy even is?"

Tony asked the question, arms out-spread, because c'mon. His fifth-graders—well, okay, technically Barton's fifth-graders, but once they cross that threshold, they're *his* for precisely forty-five painful minutes—knew the answer. Colin Hill'd even compared his computer lab policy to drug laws.

He really needed to e-mail Mama Hill one of these days and let her know her kids were batshit fucking insane.

Twenty-seven first-graders stared back him.

"Anybody?" he asked, still holding out his hands. A couple of the kids were folding their computer lab contracts into paper airplanes. God and all the various saints, the little ones were the absolute worst. "Okay, let's do it this way," he amended, and finally dropped his arms. "How many of you've gotten punished for—let's go with spoiling your dinners."

A clump of girls in the corner all looked at one another, and then raised their hands. "C'mon," he urged, "don't be shy, I bet they're not the only ones who're suckers for—well, suckers, or snickerdoodles, or whatever." A bunch more hands popped up all around the room. Good. He dropped his leftover contracts on his desk and snaked through the lab. He loved his lab, he was *proud* of it, because he'd spent eight nearly-sleepless days rewiring the damn thing so he could have rows instead of the traditional "ring around the room" layout. Well, sort-of-rows, anyway. There were computers along two of the walls, but then two long rows that stretched down the middle of the room. All the wires ran up a post in the middle of the room that he'd personally installed—and Fury'd almost blown a head gasket about it, like he'd forgotten that Tony was two-parts computer scientist and one-part badass mechanical engineer, thank you—and left enough space between the end of the row and the next wall for him to maneuver. Doubled his efficiency, because it was easier to check two banks of computers at once than to . . . turn.

He paused, stopped some kid with a B-name—Billy? Bobby? Blake? Sitting them in alphabetical order didn't help his memorization—from picking his nose, and kept walking. "Right. So, why do you get punished for spoiling your supper?"

"Because rice krispie treats aren't raw vegan," a girl in the other row answered.

Tony shuddered. What, exactly, was *wrong* with people these days? "Uh, sort of," he replied, because telling first graders their parents were broken and psycho generally made the first graders cry. "Anybody else?"

"It's against the rules," another girl called out. Loudly. Tony made a mental note to mark the screamer on his seating chart.

He snapped his fingers at her, though, and announced, "Right!" Feedback, he'd been told at about thirty-seven different education conferences, made the world go round and kept the stakeholders interested. By which they meant kids, like every kindergartener walked into the school holding a one-percent share of the place, but that was neither here nor there.

"You break rules at home," he continued, pacing around the room, "you get punished. You get, what, sent to your rooms?" A couple nods peppered their little heads. "No dessert for a week? TV privileges revoked? Yeah, you know what I'm talking about." He extracted a paper clip from one of their greedy little mouths and kept walking. "The same thing happens in Mister Stark's computer dreamhouse up here. 'Cause whatever Bru—Doctor Banner lets you do downstairs to the iMacs in

his room, that's great and everything, but this is a regime change."

"Peter peed on the keyboard of the green one last year!" the raw vegan girl announced, pointing across the room.

A kid seated roughly in the N-through-Q section turned bright red. "I did not!"

"Did too!"

"I *didn't*! Mister S—"

"Yeah, okay, not here to debate—whatever," Tony interrupted. He remembered that keyboard. That keyboard was his educational Vietnam. He shuddered and shook his head. "No peeing. Okay? Not in the contract, but it's one of the rules. No peeing, no picking your nose, and you can only throw up if you're at the garbage can and give me, like, a five minute warning."

A little boy's hand shot up into the air like it was rocket-released. "How?"

"How what?"

"How do we warn you if we need to puke?"

"You just—do," Tony explained with a wave of his hand. God, he hated the beginning grades. The beginning grades were officially the absolute worst, with their noses and still-evolving bladder control. "No food, no drinks, no treats stolen from Coulson's goodie basket."

"We can take the treats from the basket?" another boy asked.

"No," Tony informed him, and pointed not one but *two* fingers at him, just to make himself absolutely clear. "That's why I called it 'stealing' instead of 'taking with authority.' Those are for the teachers."

"Mister Coulson said you can't have any," a girl volunteered.

"And Coulson's also a liar, but that's second-week curriculum," Tony responded. The girl frowned. One of Phil's favorites, then, he reasoned. Good. Crushing the spirits—lightly, lightly crushing, nothing that'd get him in the doghouse with Fury or his wife—of Coulson's favorites was always just a little more fun than it *should* have been. "You use the programs or the games I tell you to," he continued, "you visit the websites I tell you to, you screw around only with the features I tell you to. And if any—and I mean *any*, this is the one thing I'm big on, just ask your big brothers and sisters—"

"My big brother's in prison," one of the kids offered.

Tony closed his eyes for a moment. What was that poem? Something about serenity for things he cannot change and the ability to throttle children who would not let him finish his monologue? "Great. But seriously, if any of the rules are broken, you lose computer privileges. Like, without delay. I won't even blink. Got it?"

And god bless the fear he could instill in first graders—first graders and only first graders, 'cause by second grade they decided he was mostly-harmless and started giving him hugs in the hallway and shit—because all twenty-seven of them nodded.

"Good. Now, I'm going to pass out pencils, you're going to sign the contracts, and then I'll let you log in."

He made it halfway around the classroom when the raw vegan girl announced, "Zeno just ate part of my contract!"

Tony sighed.

People needed to not name their children *Zeno*, he decided.

Also, first graders were *the worst*.

As he predicted on the drive in to school, Phil's library flooded with a dozen kids from the after-school daycare program in the cafeteria ten minutes after the buses cleared out. The kids were a mix of ages, but they all had one thing in common—they needed to start earning Accelerated Reader points in order to build up a supply to buy cool things and earn the always fantastic prizes Phil had in place for the students. He stood there and patiently listened to each of them plead their case: "It will only take two minutes." "We promise to turn every book in on time this year." "We won't tell anyone." But Phil didn't cave, although the pouting six-year-old almost pushed him over the edge.

He noticed one second grader—third, now, he corrected himself—named Luis who hung back behind the others and walked slowly towards the exit, eyes roaming over the titles. Phil felt his resolve fold at the sight. The kid was wearing a shirt that was too big and had a couple of holes, one the librarian recognized as belonging to both of his older brothers. "Luis," he called, and then directed him with a jerk of his head behind the long desk where Phil had stashed the books he and Clint had brought in the day before. "Why don't you pick out a couple to take home?" The boy's eyes went wide, and he gingerly looked through the cartons at the various covers. A moment later, he stood with two Dora the Explorer books. Phil pursed his lips. "For some reason I don't see you as a big Dora fan."

The boy blushed. "She's my little sister's favorite."

One corner of Phil's mouth kicked up in a grin. "Well, she can have those, but you pick one for yourself."

The boy gave him a big grin and immediately dove for a beaten copy of the *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*. "My mom said I'm old enough to start reading these books this year."

Phil grinned back. "Let me know when you finish that one, and I'll make sure the get the second one to you. But, just so you know, this is a super-secret stash of books. So you can't tell others about it. Only I get to decide who gets to pick from here."

The boy made a cross over his heart and darted out of the library. "Thanks, Mister Coulson!"

"Pushover," Clint called out behind him.

Phil spun around. "How'd you sneak in here?"

The other man shrugged. "I have my magical ways. How long do you need to stay?"

"Fifteen minutes? I think that's all I'll need. How long are you going to be?"

"Have to make a couple calls, then I'm good."

"Would one be going to Maria Hill?"

Clint rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I've got a story about that for you."

Place Your Bets

Chapter Summary

The staff kind of has a gambling addiction, and Steve finds motivation to learn about football.

Steve Rogers loved Friday afternoons. He was the lucky specials teacher to have his schedule free for the last part of the day at the tail end of the week. It gave him time to finalize plans for the next few days, and get the needed supplies ready. And once bus duty was over and the kids were gone, it gave him time to clean up messes before the night crew arrived—no reason for the janitorial crew to hate taking care of his room any more than they already did.

"I think there needs to be an intervention."

Steve looked up from where he was cleaning a puddle of glue off the floor to see Bucky standing in his doorway holding a piece of paper. "You're going to have to be a little more specific."

"The number of betting pools around here is kind of ridiculous."

As the other man walked further into Steve's classroom, he was able to see the paper in question was a printout of an Evite. The gang was supposed to get together tomorrow afternoon at Clint and Phil's to watch whatever college games were on. Steve usually went and played along for the camaraderie; football never held his interest. Granted, once spring rolled around and baseball was back in season, Steve's attentiveness to sports was an entirely different can of tuna. "We don't make bets that often," he countered.

Bucky gave him an eye roll before counting instances off with his free hand. "How many inappropriate comments Tony would make in his training, how long before Clint sends a Hill twin to the office, when and how the first strike in this year's prank war between Tony and Phil will go down, how long until that Wilson guy you talk about gets fired for being an inappropriate sub—"

Steve waved him off with a slight cringe. "I see your point. So, are you saying you're not going to go tomorrow?" he asked with an attempt not to sound too concerned about the other man's answer.

"Oh, no, I'll still go. I will own all of you at this and gladly accept your hard-earned money to help me pay my rent."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself."

Bucky shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

Steve gave him a look as he stood from the floor. "Weren't you just calling for an intervention a few minutes ago?"

"Well, if it's going to win me money or a beer, then it's fine."

Steve looked at him with sympathy. "Still feeling like you're herding cats?"

Bucky nodded. "You're buying me a drink." He paused and rubbed at a marker stain on one of the

tables. "I was thinking that maybe—"

Whatever words he was going to say next, and Steve really wanted to hear them, were cut off by Tony's voice over the PA system. "Attention all non-eye-patch-wearing co-workers, adult beverage time to celebrate the first pay day of the year will commence at Xavier's in thirty minutes. Be there or be square. Like Coulson."

"He couldn't have sent that in an email?" Bucky asked, his eyes now focused on one of the speakers embedded in the ceiling.

"He can't hear the sound of his own voice that way," Steve grumbled. He ran a slightly nervous hand through his hair. "What were you going to ask me before?"

Bucky shrugged. "I was going to see if you wanted to go hold up your end of the bargain, but I guess Stark did it for me."

Steve tried to smile as he nodded, but he was sure it didn't reach his eyes. He was planning on opening his mouth and hoping something nonchalant would fall out, but he was cut off by Darcy bouncing down the hall. "Hey, New Hottie. Yes, Barnes—you."

"Out of curiosity, who is Old Hottie?" Bucky asked with an expression of amused confusion on his face.

"Barton, obviously. Now if you were paying attention to your phone, you'd know that they need you up in aforementioned Old Hottie's room pronto."

"Everything okay?" Steve asked.

"One of the Hell twins—mispronunciation intended—made fun of one of Carol's girls for stammering while answering a question at the end of the day. They were hoping you could calm her down."

Bucky swore as he turned the corner to fly up the stairs to Barton's room, which was situated directly above Steve's.

"Don't get me wrong," she said to Steve, "you're still pretty hot, too. Just don't think you can handle all of this," she paused to run her hands down the front of her shirt. It displayed the school mascot, a knight in full armor riding a horse, and it looked like it was sized for a fifth grader. How Fury let her get away with wearing it in the office was beyond Steve. "But you are more than welcome to try."

"Thanks?" Steve replied.

Darcy fired a pair of finger guns at him before leaving his room to go back to the main office. Steve hesitated on what to do, but he gave into curiosity and followed Bucky's path up the stairs a moment later. By the time he made it up to the second floor, Steve heard hushed voices—Bucky and Carol's—to his left. To his right, he heard Clint's voice carrying from his classroom. "Yes, ma'am. Nine o'clock Monday morning would be great. Thank you, Miss Hill."

Steve cringed internally. A parent-teacher conference with Vice-Principal Hill was something he was grateful he'd never experienced. He didn't understand how those boys could be so misbehaved with a mother as intimidating as her.

Clint walked out into the hall with anger radiating from his compact body. He walked past Steve to join Carol and Bucky's quiet conference outside the restroom. They huddled together a moment

longer before Bucky waved them off and Clint pulled a reluctant Carol back to his classroom by her elbow. Steve moved to join them, and as he did, he heard a familiar cadence of high-heeled clicks approaching.

"What happened?" Pepper asked quietly once she reached the knot of people standing in the hallway.

Clint answered before Carol's temper overflowed through her mouth. "Right before school dismissed, I was having the kids go around and tell me what their plans were for the weekend. I make it game; they have to use ten words or less when answering. Anna got nervous and started to stammer, Colin cut her off two words in and said that by the sound of things, she'd already used her ten words. I got after him, but then it was time for Carol's kids to go to her room to have a final check of the day with her. Carol asked her what happened, and she got upset and locked herself in a bathroom stall."

"I tried to get her to come out," Carol interrupted. "She's had a rough week—adjusting to a new school, adjusting to life with her dad, anniversary of losing her mom. I tried to get her to talk to me, but she wouldn't. I know she doesn't ride the bus, so I let her hide out till the kids were gone with hopes that she'd open up—no such luck. I had Darcy call Bucky up here—he was her teacher last year."

Steve turned his head back to peek around the corner and saw Bucky leaning against the wall outside the entrance to the girls' restroom. "Anna," Bucky called. "I'd love to talk to you, but I'm not a girl. You're going to have to come out here in order for that to happen."

There was a moment of silence, then the sound of a latch being thrown and the telltale creaking of a stall door. Clint waved everyone back into his room to give the two some privacy, but not soon enough for Steve to miss the tear streaks on the girl's face as she slowly emerged from the restroom.

He felt his jaw clinch. He remembered all too well what it was to be in those shoes, the ones that belonged to a kid who was seen as different and an easy target. Steve, too, had been young when he'd lost a parent, and he'd endured being treated with kid gloves when he was sick. He only received two treatments when he was his students' age: pity or having power lorded over him by any kid who was stronger (which was nearly all of them).

"A talk with Mom isn't good enough," Carol argued, drawing Steve's attention from his past back into the present.

Clint rolled his eyes and threw his hands up in frustration. "Carol, I can't—"

"It's not good enough, Clint. He demeaned her in front of the entire class—"

"And we will both talk about it with Maria on Monday."

Carol waved off his comment. "Please. She lets them get away with this kind of crap all of the time."

Clint shook his head. "She deals with bullying all the time. And," he said loudly to prevent her from interrupting, "she has less than a year left before they're in her building. There's no way she wants to these kinds of conversations and parent-teacher conferences with the people who work for her."

"I still might kill them on Monday," she grumbled.

"I'll help you hide the bodies," Steve agreed. Carol and Pepper raised an eyebrow at him in surprise. He shrugged. "I hate bullies."

"See?" Carol exclaimed to Clint while pointing at Steve. "He's on my side."

"Woman, I have got this under control."

It was Clint's turn to get an eyebrow raise as Pepper and Steve tried to hide their respective amusement and fear. "What did you just call me?"

The man sighed and hung his head in exhaustion. "I just want beer. It's payday, it's after school, where is my beer?"

His question went unanswered as Bucky led Anna back into Clint's room for her to gather her things. "My room is right downstairs. You need anything, you come talk to me. But, you know, ask Mister Barton or Miss Danvers for permission first, okay?"

"Thanks, M-m-m-mister B-b-barnes," she replied meekly.

Bucky gave her a big grin and squeezed her shoulder before Carol and Pepper swooped in to sandwich the girl between them. They walked her out of the room so she could go to the after school program in the cafeteria.

"Five bucks says one of those twins goes missing before we get to October," Clint said to the two men.

Steve turned to Bucky. "Maybe we do need an intervention."

The other man shook his head. "Screw the intervention. You're buying me beer. Now."

Most of the staff was at Xavier's within the next half hour. A good chunk of them stayed for a little over an hour before saying their goodbyes, leaving behind the group of close friends. Carol continued to pester Clint about what should happen in the meeting on Monday until Phil broke in, reminding everyone to come over around eleven the following day. Dibs were called on who would bring what snack food, and Phil made sure to take down everyone's favorite pizza toppings. "And, Stark, no hacking Fantasy Football websites when we do drafts next week to put yourself into first place."

"That was never proven," Stark countered.

"You beat everyone by, like, seven thousand points," Bruce retorted.

"Still never proven."

Phil shook his head. "Money goes to me. There's a reason Clint teaches reading and not math."

Clint rolled his eyes. "Did I miss the memo about today being Shit on Clint Day?"

"Oh, poor baby," Darcy said as she reached over to pat him on the head.

He swiped her hand away. "Don't touch me. I heard I'm now Old Hottie."

She perked up on her barstool. "Does that mean if I drop the 'old,' I can touch you?"

"No," Phil answered.

Darcy pouted. "Coulson, stop being such a fun ruiner." That earned her a high-five from Tony.

"How many staff members have you sexually harassed today?" Phil asked in return.

Darcy's eyes rolled up to the ceiling as she silently mouthed names and counted off using her fingers.

"Are we doing picks for the college games?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, always," Clint answered. "Haven't you checked your mailbox at all this week?"

"Of course not," Tony replied for him. "Bruce's mailbox is a black hole. It's where papers go to die."

"Like yours would be any better if Pepper didn't go through it to make sure you got the important paperwork." Tony laughed while Pepper raised her glass to Bruce in gratitude for his acknowledgement. Bruce turned his attention back to Clint and Phil. "Can I still get mine in tomorrow?"

"As long as it's before kick-off of the first game, you're good," Clint answered.

"Is it okay if I give you mine now?" Bucky asked.

Phil nodded and stretched out his hand to accept Bucky's form and donation of five dollars to the pot. Clint reached over and snatched the paper to look over his predicted winners. He gave a nod of approval at what he saw. "New guy has decent picks—challenge accepted."

"Please don't encourage his ego," Natasha asked as she took a sip of beer.

Bucky laughed. "My ego is warranted on this one."

She raised an eyebrow at him in response. "Willing to put more than a couple of dollars where your mouth is?"

"What d'you have in mind?"

"I want manicotti."

Bucky grinned. "Fine. I want vodka, the good stuff."

"Done," she agreed as she clinked her glass against his.

"Is this bet open to anyone?" Darcy asked. "Because I enjoy food and booze."

Natasha smirked at her. "In order for you to win, dear, you'd have to base your picks on something other than how good the quarterback's ass looks."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Steve leaned in towards Bucky, who was sitting on his left. "Manicotti?"

The other man gave a soft smile in return. "My family's Italian on my mother's side. Some kids go to a friend's house after school and get fruit or cookies for a snack; my mother would bake you a fresh lasagna complete with handmade pasta." He shrugged. "She made sure I knew a few recipes before I left for college."

"Sounds delicious."

"Beat me in the pool and you can find out just how good it is," he challenged. "And, thanks for the beer," he added as quickly clapped his hand on Steve's shoulder while rising from his stool.

"You're leaving already?" Steve asked and immediately mentally chastised himself for sounding slightly on the pathetic side.

"It's my niece's birthday. My sister's family—that particular sister anyway—lives eight hours away. Since I couldn't drive in for the birthday dinner, I promised I'd Skype with them."

"See you tomorrow then," Steve said.

Bucky nodded at him as he turned to leave. He heard Natasha mutter something at him in what sounded like Russian, but whatever it was, it made Bucky pull a face at her before he leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. He waved goodbye to everyone and made his way out of the bar.

"One last round on me," Clint called out, "then we've got to go home and clean the house."

"We?" Phil countered.

"Yes, you live there too, remember?"

"I'm not the messy one."

"I'll make it worth your while," Clint said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Good lord," Tony exclaimed with an eye roll. "We don't want to hear about how you wear a French maid costume around the house to entice Coulson. Go get the damn drinks."

"I'll help you," Steve said as he rose and followed Clint to the bar.

"Seven Miller Lites and two waters, please," Clint ordered once the bartender gave him his attention.

"So," Steve started and tried his best to sound casual, "what are your thoughts about tomorrow's games?"

Clint gave him a skeptical look. "Since when do you care enough to guess beyond your usual method of picking whoever has the best team colors? Why are you suddenly making good choices?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "You don't have to talk to me like I'm one of your students."

Clint held his hands up in defense. "Sorry, habit."

"Maybe I'm just tired of always losing my money."

"You have lost a lot of it the last few years," he agreed. He sighed as he thought about things. "It's still pre-conference, so you'd be pretty safe always picking the higher-ranked teams. If neither of them are ranked, look at their records or get on ESPN's website and see who the experts picking."

Steve nodded, "Thanks."

"Welcome."

They carried the drinks back to the table, giving the waters to Tony and Bruce while dispensing the beers to everyone else. Everyone stayed for another thirty minutes or so before gathering their things to go home. Bruce made sure to ask if everyone was okay to drive, which they were, and they left with anticipation of getting back together the following afternoon.

Once he was home in his small but cozy house, Steve booted up his laptop and got out his form. He had research to do.

"Okay, everybody stop the presses. Steve's picks don't actually suck."

Steve rolled his eyes as Clint half-danced out of his reach with his betting form, but in its own way, the damage was done. The faces of his friends—at least, the faces of his friends who were already present—all lifted as one, and he was left standing in the doorway with his jacket still on.

"You're lying," Tony accused.

"Nah, look!" Clint held out the form. "K-State. Iowa State—which I'm just gonna ignore—plus Notre Dame. They're actually pretty good."

"You cheated." Tony's head lifted from the slip of paper. "You're a cheating cheater who cheats, or you hired somebody to do it for you, or you're secretly sleeping with somebody who actually follows sports."

"Fall sports," Pepper sing-songed.

"Whatever." He waved a hand. "Because this can't be your work. Like, it literally cannot be something that you did all by yourself with your big-boy pants on."

"It's not that unbelievable," Steve pointed out as he shucked off his jacket.

"Wanna bet?" Tony challenged. Before Steve could answer, he twisted to look over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. "Hey, Coulson!"

"What've I said about yelling in my house, Stark?" Phil shouted, voice echoing.

"What would you say if Steve picked decent teams?"

"I'd say he cheated. Why?"

Tony grinned like the cat who caught a proverbial canary. "See?" he asked, handing the slip back to Clint. "Cheated."

Steve rolled his eyes again.

Clint and Phil's living room was already set up for the usual game-viewing extravaganza, a virtual shrine to all-things sports related. Steve knew it was mostly for the benefit of all the visitors—Phil was too house-proud to put up with a football-themed tablecloth of the week, if nothing else—but he appreciated the effort in a weird way. Pepper was busily setting up the paper plates and cups at the table, as well as the start to their ridiculous collection of snacks; Tony updated his "betting board" (a white board that he only ever transported to game day events in Pepper's car because it couldn't fit in his own) by adding Steve's picks in blue. Clint was overseeing the whole arrangement, drifting between the dining area and the living room (the TV already airing pre-game coverage) and checking to make sure the place was fit for human consumption. Birdie followed behind him; Steve caught her staring forlornly at the couch more than once.

He hung his jacket in the closet before he asked Clint, "Anything I can do?"

"Nah, I don't think so." Clint rested his hands on his hips, showing off the full glory of his worn Iowa Hawkeyes t-shirt. (It'd taken Steve a year to figure out that the Hawkeyes were, in fact, a college football team.) "Unless you wanna make sure Phil doesn't burn the house down making the cheese dip."

"I can hear you, you know," Phil called through from the kitchen.

"I know!" Clint replied, and winked at Steve.

Steve smiled, a little, and surveyed the room a second time. The head-count came up the same. "Where's everybody else?"

"Bruce texted and said something about a baking experiment gone horribly wrong." Tony barely glanced up from the board. "He's stopping at—somewhere."

"Kroger," Pepper supplied.

"Once again proving the virtues of marriage!"

Pepper shook her head at his grin, and, when he leaned up to offer comically-puckered lips, pushed him back toward the board. "Darcy got roped into helping her mom," she explained. "Something about a Blu-Ray player."

"I offered to help," Tony commented without glancing up.

"You would've rewired their entire living room."

"And it would've been awesome."

Steve laughed a little and shoved his hands in his pockets. He was considering how to ask the last looming question when the smoke detector suddenly started beeping. Clint dropped the pig-in-a-blanket he'd just stolen from the dining table. "You had one job, Phil!"

"I don't even know how the microwave started doing that!" Phil shouted back, and left Clint to charge into the kitchen to rescue him, the dog trotting along behind.

Everyone else started arriving in pretty short order once the charred Velveeta dip was replaced with queso out of a can. Bruce walked in with Natasha nearly on his heels, the former carrying a plastic container of store-bought brownies and Natasha with a fruit platter and two six-packs of beer. Carol showed up just before kick-off with a bunch of two-liter bottles of soda, and Darcy supplemented all the beverages with a vat of something in a terrifying pink color.

"Secret family recipe!" she announced, pouring herself a massive glass with the ladle stolen from Clint and Phil's kitchen.

"It smells like rubbing alcohol," Carol observed. When Darcy leveled a dirty look in her direction, she added, "Not complaining, just *saying*."

Steve declined a glass of the mystery-drink, squeezing onto the couch with Tony, Pepper, and Natasha to watch the game. He hadn't really paid that much attention to the match-up when he'd ranked his choices. At least Clint's loud groans of disgust at his pick—the opponent to Steve's—indicated that he'd done a pretty good job.

Halfway through the second quarter, as Steve stood at the table helping himself to the canned cheese dip, the doorbell rang. Birdie immediately scrabbled to her feet and started barking.

"Just come in!" Clint yelled over the din. When Birdie kept barking, he nudged her rump with a foot.

Phil sighed. "I'm glad I wasn't marrying for class."

"Now, *ass*, on the other hand . . . " Clint wagged his eyebrows, leaving Tony to groan and hide his face in Pepper's shoulder. At least Pepper had the decency to pat his head in the least-reassuring way possible.

"Sorry, guys," Bucky apologized, kicking the door shut with the back of his heel and then nearly getting bowled over by the dog. Clint whistled at her, but to no avail, leaving Steve—because he was the only one *up*, he justified—to walk over and drag her away. He made a point not to study Bucky in his soft college-team t-shirt and blue jeans, or to appreciate the way his arms bunched as he held his foil-covered baking sheet.

"You did not make that pesto pizza thing," Natasha challenged from the love seat she was sharing with Bruce.

Bucky grinned. "I figured since everybody knew my secret, I could bring something decent." He shrugged slightly. "It's just cheese, pesto, prosciutto, olives, and—"

"Oh my god, I love you," Darcy blurted out, interrupting. Steve watched as she practically scaled the couch to look over at Bucky. "Can I have your food babies?"

When Bucky looked momentarily confused, Bruce explained, "She's been drinking."

"Quiet, you're low-ranked on the hottie list." Darcy waved a shushing hand in his direction. "Can I?"

"Uh, I'm gonna go with 'no,'" Bucky answered, and at least Steve could laugh when Darcy pouted.

Steve's pick for the first round lost soundly—"That's what you get for picking Iowa *State*," Clint chided—but Notre Dame managed to eke out ahead of whatever team they'd been slated to play against, leaving him one-for-one. They ordered pizza during that game, but none of it really compared to Bucky's pesto pizza creation.

"It's like a gift from god," Darcy moaned around her last piece.

"We're cutting you off," Phil decided.

Ten minutes before the final game of the day—Kansas State versus Nebraska—Tony looked up from where he was updating the betting board. "You know, Buckminster—"

"Really?" Natasha asked from where she was helping herself to more snacks.

"—you're kinda witnessing a miracle. Like, we're talking a 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus'-level, second-coming kind of thing."

Bucky laughed and shook his head. The seating'd shifted somewhere between the pizza arriving and the snacks needing refills. Steve wasn't complaining, though, because it landed him on the couch with Pepper (who was sane) and Bucky (who was *Bucky*). Clint was perched on the arm of the chair that Phil'd taken over, Bruce and Tony were sharing the loveseat (when Tony wasn't

drifting around the room), and Darcy was propped up against the arm of the loveseat, the debris of plastic cups and paper plates around her on the floor.

"What miracle?" Bucky asked, finally taking the bait.

"Steve not sucking at this whole thing." Tony gestured to the board. "He's one for one and it's not too far from being two for one. 'Cause, you know, K-State."

"You're only saying that because you picked it, too," Carol observed.

"And because you don't want to admit K-State is going to get creamed by Nebraska." Bucky leaned back on the couch and stretched his arms along the cushions. "Massacred, even."

Natasha sighed. "Here we go."

"Seriously?" Tony asked. He put down the marker with a resounding clack. "Nebraska? Maybe if they were playing with an ear of corn and some cow-pie landmines, but seriously *Nebraska*?"

"Give him a break, he's new," Clint said smugly. "We all have to make mistakes occasionally."

"Nebraska's yet to lose a pre-conference game this year," Phil pointed out.

"That's grounds for divorce in some states."

"So's finding out your spouse is an Iowa fan, but you don't hear me complaining."

Carol nearly choked on her brownie. "Point to Coulson."

Clint scowled at her. "After all the stupid air shows I've gone to as your plus one, you're really gonna do me like that?" Phil rolled his eyes at his husband's best betrayed face. "I'll remember this, Danvers, and at a time you least expect it—"

"Actually." Steve's own voice surprised him, some, but once the word broke into the conversation, he couldn't really stop himself. "Nebraska's been doing pretty well, but I think from last year's stats and some of the articles on ESPN, K-State has more staying power. Plus, one of Nebraska's players is out on injury this week."

When he finished, everyone, Darcy included, was staring.

"Speaking of least expected," Bruce said quietly after a few seconds.

"You're a pod person," Tony followed-up.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Because I looked up information?"

"You didn't *look* up information," Tony accused, pointing a finger at him and twisting it in a circle. "You—you *researched*. You ranked and tested and checked sports websites and— Did you even know the URL for ESPN before last night?"

"I think everyone knows ESPN-dot-com, Tony," Pepper said with a sigh.

"Because I don't know how you broke your streak of using the *color wheel* to select your picks, or why you're not still 'roy-g-biv'-ing it up—"

"That's not a thing," Natasha intoned.

"—but whatever you're doing now, it's just— It's *not*."

From her spot on the floor, Darcy lulled her head back against the couch and peered up at Steve. "But it's hot," she decided.

Steve wasn't sure whether it was the way she raised her eyebrows or the way she smirked, but he swore he felt the tips of his ears warm. "Thanks," he said. He tried to glance at his lap instead of at Darcy.

Except, then, someone nudged him. When his head rose, he caught Bucky grinning at him. "You know, if you wanted the manicotti *that* bad, you could've just asked. I'm pretty easy."

Natasha, who'd come over from the snack table to squeeze onto the loveseat with Bruce and Tony (next to Bruce, though, not Tony and his sometimes-inappropriate hands), choked on a potato chip.

Steve shrugged, but he couldn't resist a little smile. "Maybe I'm just sick of losing my money."

"Wait, was food a deal in all this?" Clint piped up. "Because if there's a free-food side bet, I am *so* game."

"Your free-food side bet is sitting next to you," Carol pointed out.

"Uh, you weren't here when he burned the cheese dip. Your argument is invalid."

Bucky laughed and held up his hands. "If I bet with all of you, I'd be making manicotti until the end of days. I only jump in when you're worthy."

"Or easy pickings," Tony suggested.

"Or that," he added, but winked at Steve when no one else was looking. Steve laughed and tried not to let that heat go to his face. Whether or not he succeeded, well, that was a different matter entirely.

"Okay, so, what really gives?"

Steve glanced up from where he was helping Phil and Clint pick up paper plates and cups to see Tony peering at him across the living room. Everyone else had wandered off shortly after the end of the third game. Carol drove Darcy home and promised to bring her back the next morning for her car, Natasha and Bucky'd waved goodbye while arguing about what constituted "the good stuff" for vodka-bet purposes, and Bruce'd stepped out to help Pepper load some of the leftover supplies—plus the betting board—into the car.

Which left Phil, Clint, and Tony.

"Nothing gives," Steve replied. He stacked empty cups one inside the other. "Student loan repayment went up. I like money."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You're a horrible liar. Coulson, tell him he's a horrible liar."

From where he was loading a black garbage bag full of napkin debris, Phil shook his head. "I'm not getting into another debate between you two. I thought I'd be murdered for where I came down on

the Yankees-versus-Jets debate."

"*Mets*," Clint corrected, groaning. "God, how is it that you can sort college teams into conference without a cheat-sheet but don't know pro teams? Were you like this when we met?"

"I was probably worse," Phil admitted.

"Thank god we met when you were wearing that too-tight white dress shirt that showed off your chest, then, because otherwise—"

"Okay, see, no," Tony interrupted, holding up his hands. "I'm not in this for creepy married pillow talk."

"You're married, too, you know," Phil observed.

"I'm in this to know why Steve, overnight, went from using mascots and color schemes and *geography* to determine his picks to actually, like, using research and logic and his brain."

Steve shook his head. "Your confidence is overwhelming."

"This has nothing to do with confidence and has everything to do with how you became a pod person." Tony narrowed his eyes. "Are you a pod person? That might actually explain this, if you were replaced in the night by a weird cyborg version of yourself."

"Glad I came back in time to catch the start of the android overlord rant," Pepper commented as she wandered back into the living room. "I'll tell you how it ends: no one is an AI hell-bent on universal destruction, and we're leaving."

Tony glanced over his shoulder at her. "Steve could be."

"Steve's not," Steve assured him.

"I dunno. I mean, you took most of us." Clint crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought Carol's head was gonna explode, and you almost got a tray of pasta or whatever out of it."

"Pasta?" Tony asked.

"For actual years, you've mocked me that I didn't bother to find out anything about these teams," Steve replied, conveniently side-stepping the question. "Now, I decide to research, and I'm a pod person."

"Or cyborg overlord," Phil deadpanned, and Clint snorted a laugh.

"Or that." Steve glanced over at Tony and raised his hands. "No ulterior motive, I promise."

Tony quirked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Really."

"Glad that's settled, then," Pepper said, sighing. She placed a hand on Tony's arm and tugged. "We'll see you all Monday."

Tony stayed for a moment longer, rooted to the floor and peering at Steve. "Or will we?"

"I might take over the universe with my cyborg powers, yes," Steve offered, shaking his head.

"See, Pepper? See, I *told* you!"

Steve, Clint, and even Phil laughed as Pepper dragged her husband out the front door. "Patience of a saint," Phil finally commented.

"Pepper?" Steve asked.

"All of us."

Steve grinned at him as he took the bag from Clint and walked through into the kitchen. It was only after he opened the back door and whistled for the dog that Steve realized Clint was watching him. "What?" he asked.

"Is it really about the money?"

"Please don't tell me you're buying into Tony's crazy."

"Hey, just asking." Clint shook his head. "You put up a good fight. Next time, you might actually win."

"Maybe," Steve replied with a shrug. "Just no Iowa State, right?"

"None," Clint said gravely, and then grinned when Steve laughed.

Meetings Galore

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we look at the greatest part of any teacher's life: meetings. (Please note the heavy sarcasm in that statement.)

"I will crack their skulls with a cinderblock," Carol threatened.

Across the table, Clint frowned until all the lines on his face crinkled. "Let's not open with that," he suggested.

Maria Hill was running late. Of course she was; she was the administrator of a middle school with two little hellions of her own to pack into the car and off to school. Or, this morning, into Carol's classroom, devoid of all children. She'd parceled out the couple who usually started their day with her to the other special education teachers so she could participate in this farce Clint insisted was a conference.

She tapped her pen against the table. Clint shot her a dirty look, and she rolled her eyes. "What?"

He raised his hands from the tabletop. "I thought a weekend would mellow you out," he admitted. She suspected that the corner of his lip was twitching in a tiny smirk.

"Saturday mellowed me out. Yesterday, I started getting ready for work. Getting ready for work meant thinking about this. You can guess how it snowballed."

"Obviously."

"Barton, I'm trained in five forms of hand-to-hand combat. Do you really think you should be—"

A light knock at the door interrupted her train of thought, and when Carol glanced up, Maria Hill was standing in the doorway. "Are you ready for us?" she asked. She was smiling, but only in that forced-polite way.

Carol forced the same smile back. "Sure," she said.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with Maria Hill, necessarily. She was a single mom, she worked hard, she cared about her kids and her job, and she showed up to every school event imaginable. There were a lot of parents who did worse. But as she walked into the room and the two messy-haired brats she called her twins trailed in behind her, Carol still couldn't quite shut off the part of her brain that was *pissed*.

Though, points went to Maria when the boys sat in exactly the chairs she pointed to without a moment's hesitation.

"Thanks for meeting with us," Clint said. He stood to shake her hand, and Carol followed. "We figured sooner was better."

"Absolutely," Maria agreed, sitting down. "And trust me when I say I've already talked to both of them, repeatedly, about this incident. They're sorry."

"We are," Keith offered. Colin said absolutely nothing.

"I'm sure they are," Clint replied, sporting his own version of the polite smile. "And if this was the only incident that'd happened in the last couple days, I'm not sure I would've asked you to come in."

"I would've," Carol volunteered, and then ignored Clint's dirty look.

"The point is, Miss Hill, that it looks like the boys are trying to pick off every easy-looking target they can find, and that's not something we tolerate around here."

Maria frowned. "Can you explain what you mean?"

"Sure: your boys are victimizing the kids they think won't fight back." Carol *felt* the heat of another of Clint's sharp looks, but purposely ignored it. "It's the same thing as last year, only there are no older brothers in the building to shove them down on the playground when they get caught."

Colin rolled his eyes. "I never did anything to Tom's sister."

"You sure?" To Clint's credit, he asked the question in the same breath as Carol. Then again, since everybody in the school'd heard about that playground fight, it would've been harder *not* to ask.

Colin crossed his arms and slunk down in the chair. "Look, I believe every year's a new start," Clint continued. "I don't know you, some of your classmates don't know you, you can be whoever you wanna be. And now's the time for you to do it, because peer pressure's gets worse when you're in middle school, not better. But this stops. *Now*."

"Or?" Keith asked carefully.

"Or you're going to be grounded for the rest of your natural lives," Maria snapped, and he flinched. "Do you know how embarrassing it is to get calls from the school next door about how *both* of you are harassing your classmates?" Her head twisted toward Colin, who looked at the floor. "To explain to my boss why I have to come in late today? I don't know why this keeps happening, but I'm not spending another year where I have to meet with your teachers twice a month to keep you from tormenting all your classmates!"

The last comment was punctuated by the first bell of the day. It echoed down the hallway, and Keith squirmed. On the other side of their mother, Colin glared at the floor. "Can we go to class?"

"Not until we're done here," his mother retorted.

"Might be good for them to head that direction." Carol frowned over at Clint, who shrugged.

"Mister Rogers is probably looking for them, and it might be good to talk in private for a couple minutes."

Maria nodded, and the boys immediately each bolted to their feet. In the doorway, Colin shoved Keith, who shoved him back hard enough that he almost tripped. Carol considered shouting at them, but then they disappeared. The door slammed behind them.

Maria sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. They're not like this outside of school—well, except when they're tormenting each other—but they walk in this building and it's like they flip a switch."

"Have you tried them in different classes?" Clint asked.

"They were worse," Carol answered.

Maria nodded. "Third grade was open season on all their classmates. We end every year okay, summer camp goes fine, then they get back from Ed's and it all starts over again."

Clint glanced at Carol, who shrugged. "Ed?"

"Their dad," Maria replied with a hand-wave. "He lives in Virginia. They spend from their birthday—July nineteenth—until a week before school starts with him, his wife, and her kids." She shook her head. "I swear, they're just punishing me for making them come back."

"How long have you been divorced?" Carol asked.

"Most of their life." Maria's tone almost held a half-laugh. "I don't know what's going on with them, but I'm going to make *sure* this stops. Even if I have to sell every electronic in the house on eBay."

Carol barely resisted her urge to roll her eyes. "Have you considered maybe that there's more going on than—"

"Thank you, Miss Hill," Clint interrupted, standing. Carol scowled at him, but Maria followed suit. "I'm gonna keep calling if they keep acting up, get some of the other teachers in on this too. Maybe if we're coming at it from all the angles, they'll get that we're done."

"I hope so." Maria shook his hand again, leaving Carol to scramble up and follow suit. "Thank you."

"No problem," Clint said, and waved at her until she left the room.

Carol barely waited for the door to close before she turned on Clint. "What is wrong with you? She basically said, 'The kids only turn into hell-beasts when they come back from their dad's' and you toss her out? What happened to having this under control?"

He rolled his eyes. "Think about it, Carol," he returned. "This isn't like when you test a kid for the first time and you've gotta break it to his parents that he needs services. If she doesn't see it, us waving a flag's not gonna fix it."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Pepper, for a start." He crossed his arms and shrugged. "Maybe pulling in last year's teachers and the specials and figuring out what they're into. Give them an outlet."

"Give them an outlet? They're bullies, Clint."

"And I was a fucking shithole of a kid 'till somebody pointed me in the right direction, too." He caught her eyes and pinned her with a serious look. "You really think it's gonna make more sense to bring her back in here? 'Cause I'll run down and stop her from leaving. But maybe we rope Pepper into this now and see if it does any good."

"Pepper'll want us dead."

"No, she'll want *me* dead. And probably them." Clint's mouth twisted into a tiny half-smile. "You can blame me."

Carol rolled her eyes. "Already on the agenda. But listen up," she said, and jabbed a finger into his chest. "This thing has a shelf-life of one mean-spirited shit show. Because if there's even a whiff of them picking on anybody the way they did Anna—and I mean anybody, not even one of my kids—

and we're having my kind of heart-to-heart with Mom."

Clint held her eyes for a few long seconds before he finally nodded. Only when she dropped her finger did he add, "You're fucking terrifying, you know that?"

She shoved him in the shoulder. "Five forms of hand-to-hand. You don't want to mess with this."

"But what a way to *go*," he said with a grin, and she tossed her pen at him on his way out.

Pepper looked up from the files laid out on her desk when she heard the IM ping on her computer. She knew from the sound that it wasn't from Tony—he'd customized any ringtone that could possibly be associated with him. This was from Darcy, letting her know that her two o'clock appointment was here. Pepper gave the cumulative folders—one for a second grade girl and the other for her brother in kindergarten—a final glance before making her way into the main office.

Sitting in a chair in front of Darcy's countertop was an elderly gentleman. Pepper guessed that the striped collared shirt he wore was at least a decade old, and the khakis were dated as well. But he looked clean, didn't reek of cigarettes, and his eyes weren't bloodshot; that was more than a number of parents she'd met with before could say. "Mister Garrison?" she asked as she stepped around the counter.

"Yes, ma'am," he said standing from his chair.

She waved off the formality. "Please, call me Miss Potts. I'm the guidance counselor here. Miss Lewis said you requested a meeting with me?"

"Yes, I did." His left hand tinkered with some change in his pocket and even though he tried to maintain eye contact with her, his gaze kept shifting to the ground.

"Well, why don't we go back to my office so we can talk?" Pepper led him around the counter and into the short hallway where her office was located. She waved him to the one of the overstuffed chairs in her office. The kids liked them because they could almost disappear in them. "So, what brings you here today?"

"My grandkids—Macy and Devon—well, they're under my care for the time being."

Pepper flicked her eyes down to the folders on her desk to confirm what she already thought. "On their files, we have them listed in the custody of their mother, Diane."

The gentleman nodded, and Pepper saw his jaw tighten for a second. "My daughter. She and her husband—Gary—divorced about three years ago. He's moved out of state and recently remarried. He gave up his share of the custody when he moved away."

Pepper felt a knot growing in her stomach. "And Diane?"

He shook his head. "She dropped the kids off a week ago, saying she was going to go spend the night at her new boyfriend's. She hasn't been back since."

"Have you heard from her?"

He nodded. "She calls every night to talk to the kids, but I can't get two words in before she hurries off the phone. I drove past his place a few times; her car's there, but his is gone. I don't have a way to get in contact with him. I only knew where he lived because my granddaughter has a good enough sense of direction to lead me there." His fingers clenched into fists. "I didn't raise my

daughter in a way that should make her think it's okay to abandon her kids."

"I'm sure you didn't, sir. But," and Pepper hated to ask the question but knew she needed to go through with it, "is that what you think she's done? Do you think she's run off for good?"

He paused a moment before answering. "I don't think so. She keeps telling the kids she's going to come back. And I know that could be a lie, but she loves those babies. I don't think she could stay away from them for too long."

Pepper nodded. "I certainly hope that's the case, too. But it wouldn't be a bad idea to see if she'll sign a letter stating that you have the ability to approve of medical care just in case—God forbid—something were to happen." She reached for one of her business cards and flipped it over. On the back she wrote a phone number she knew by heart. "This is the number for a friend of mine. His name is James Rhodes, and he's a social worker. He can help you get that letter if you want it. And he's another person who'd be happy to answer any questions you may have."

The older man accepted the card with a nod and placed it in his wallet. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll take all the help I can get."

Pepper tilted her head. "What else do you need assistance with?"

He shrugged. "Things are just so different than when I was raising Diane. I feel like I'm having to learn how to be a parent all over again. I just feel like I don't always know the right thing to do, the right thing to say. I'm not good with words. My wife—Cynthia—she always knew just what to say to make those kids smile." A wistful expression came across his face that quickly faded into one of loneliness. "She passed away last year."

"I'm so sorry."

He nodded and took a minute to collect his thoughts. "I barely survived being a parent with her; I have no idea how I can do this without her being around." He ended the thought with the rough noise of clearing his throat. Removing a handkerchief from his pocket, he quickly swiped at his eyes.

Pepper felt something break in her at the sight. "Are you making sure they're going to bed at a decent time?"

"Eight on the dot every night after they take a bath." He paused. "Is that a good time?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "That's just fine. And baths are good, too. You're feeding them dinner?"

He nodded. "And a snack when they get home from school. And breakfast, too."

"Good. You know we serve breakfast here in the mornings, too. In case you run a little behind schedule."

He gave her a small smile with the first gleam of light in his eye she'd seen since they started talking. "I'm former military, ma'am; I don't believe in running behind schedule."

She laughed. "Can you give my husband a few tips on that matter?" His smile grew a bit more at her words. "And the food you're feeding them, it's not fast food every night or junk food all the time?"

"No ma'am. I don't know how to cook much, but I can grill with the best of them still. And the

kids, they like those steamer bags of vegetables from the frozen foods aisle." He shrugged. "I think they just like to watch the bag get bigger in the microwave."

"Whatever it takes to get them to eat broccoli is fine. I haven't heard any complaints from their teachers, so I'm guessing they're coming to school in clean clothes everyday."

He nodded. "We've been staying at their house. I sleep in my daughter's bed. That way they can have all their clothes and their toys with them. Be more comfortable, sleep in their own beds."

She leaned forward in her seat. "It sounds like you're doing a better job than you give yourself credit for." He ducked his head at the compliment. "And they're doing okay here at school?"

He grinned. "It's all they talk about when they get home."

Pepper's eyes glanced at her files once more. "Miss Drew is Macy's teacher and Devon is in Doctor Banner's morning class?"

"Yes. Devon and I work on his worksheets when he gets home and he reads me stories while we wait for Macy to get home. Sometimes he makes up his own tales; he can't read all of his books yet."

Pepper smiled. "It shows a great imagination, and I like that in a kid. Besides, Doctor Banner is a great teacher. You're going to be amazed how much Devon will learn this year."

The man gave what could only be classified as a proud Grandpa smile. "Macy was in his class two years ago. She still talks about the day the baby chicks hatched from their eggs."

She nodded. "That's always an exciting time around here. What other questions do you have?"

He shook his head. "I think I just needed someone to listen to me for a minute. You've been very kind."

She smiled. "The card I gave you has my extension on it, if you ever need to call. Or you can talk to Miss Lewis again and make another appointment. I'd be more than happy to help. I'll make sure to talk to Macy and Devon in the near future and see how they're doing. And please let us know whenever you hear something about their mother. And—just so you know—you're doing a better job than most parents I talk to on a given day. Give yourself some credit."

He ducked his head again. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Miss Potts, please."

He looked her in the eye with grin. "Yes, ma'am."

She walked him out to the main office and had Darcy give him the extensions for both Jessica Drew and Bruce so he could call them and let them know what was going on. After waving him goodbye, she came back to her office to find Tony lounging across the oversized chair Mister Garrison had just vacated. "Shouldn't you be dodging the bodily fluids of first graders right about now?" she asked.

"It's Monday," he said, eyes never leaving his smartphone. "I'm on planning."

"Ah," she answered and sat in her chair with a sigh.

The noise caught his attention, and his face crinkled in concern as he looked up at her. "You

okay?"

"We can't ever have kids. If something happens, they'd have to live with my parents. On the farm. I grew up on that farm. My hair is just now devoid of the fine aroma of pig manure."

"And they say I'm the one in this marriage who speaks with zero context going on," Tony muttered.

"I spend more time during the week than I want in meetings with parents who could not care less about the life they brought into this world. And then I spend this afternoon with a grandfather who's worried sick he's going to screw things up for his grandkids who are already having a hard time."

"Which kids?"

"The Garrisons."

"Marcy and Purple Shirt?" he asked.

Pepper shook her head at him. "Macy and Devon."

"Yeah, that's what I said." He paused and swung his feet from dangling off the arm of the chair to down on the floor. "Do I want to know?"

"Their mom's an idiot. I hate stupid parents," she muttered as she put her feet up on her desk.

"Good lord, why on earth do you need shoes that big? You're already eight feet taller than the fifth grade girls without them."

"But then I wouldn't be eye-level with you, and that's kind of a deal breaker."

"For who?"

"Fury." She laughed as Tony's entire body shuttered.

"How did we draw the short straw?" Tony complained for about the fifteenth time in the last fifteen minutes, slouching down in his chair and crossing his arms. "We could be watching TV, or having sex, or having sex with the TV on like good red-blooded American— *Ow!*"

Pepper smiled like an innocent little flower and finger-waved at a few of the moms filtering into the room before digging her pink-painted death-talons out of the flesh of Tony's arm. Tony glared at her and her sly side-eye. "For the tenth time," she told him out of the corner of her mouth, "they're discussing the after-school program funds tonight."

"So we have to be here?" he retorted. "You know how this works. They decide what they want, I anonymously donate the rest, everybody's—"

"You cannot fix every problem by throwing money at it, Tony."

"Says who?"

"Says Fury, for one, who purposely threatened me that if you kept this up, he would—"

"Hey! Martial privilege! What's said in our bed stays in our bed, you can't tattle on me to Fury and expect to—"

"Friend Stark!" boomed a voice loud enough to shake the classroom windows, and Tony resisted his urge to slide right out of the uncomfortable plastic chair. Oh, sure, Thor Odinson was a great guy to know if your siding needed redone or you wanted to pave paradise to put up a parking lot, but not so much in these situations. Because in these situations, his meaty hand thundered down on Tony's shoulder, and Tony cringed. "I had hoped you'd attend this fine evening! After Henry told me about the incident involving the game with frogs and fractions—"

"Incident?" Pepper asked, raising her eyebrows.

Tony raised his hands to fend off the potential reappearance of her death-talons. "'Incident' is a pretty strong word for 'he got pissed and tossed the wireless mouse at the wall,' nothing I couldn't handle."

"—we had a long discussion about respecting others' property. And," Thor added, his grin growing, "Jane assembled a platter of apology brownies. She will be in with them momentarily."

"Take your time," Tony assured him, flashing his best *thanks for the meddling but please don't slap me on the shoulder and give me a bone bruise* grin. "I mean, it's not like I'm going anywhere. Have to be here for the big discussion on the technology budget."

"Of course," Thor replied. He grinned, shook Pepper's hand, and then wandered off to mingle with the rest of the parents.

When he was finally out of earshot, Tony glanced over to catch Pepper half-glaring at him. "What?"

"I can't decide whether I'm annoyed that you didn't tell me about the wireless mouse, or if I'm annoyed that you obviously just played up the whole situation for brownies."

"Okay, one," he returned, holding up his index finger, "it was a ten-buck off-brand mouse that was only on that computer because I needed to switch out the proper mouse port. It died a soldier's death, I buried it in a Kleenex box and everything."

Pepper raised one very pretty, very shapely eyebrow.

"And two," he added, employing a second finger for emphasis, "you know how this Odin-spawn thing works. They do something terrible, their mom bakes, we profit. Nobody criticizes lions for picking off the slow wildebeests."

"That's your defense?"

"That, and how they're really *fantastic* brownies." He leaned over to nudge her shoulder, and she rolled her eyes. Luckily that they'd gotten good at this marriage thing, though, or Tony might've missed how her lip'd started curling up in a smile. "C'mon. You don't want me to spend the next two hours acting like a petulant kid, here's your solution."

"Baked goods," she deadpanned.

"*Delicious* baked goods. And if you're good, I'll even share."

"Oh no," Pepper informed him, her eyes flicking in his direction while she stayed facing forward, "you *will* be sharing."

By the end of the PTA meeting, Tony'd made at least three witty and also helpful comments (he'd counted), explained twice why they really still needed some of the PTA discretionary funds to help

out the parts of the after-school program not covered by the school board (like the parts where Tony's computers went through three times the wear-and-tear when all the kids who didn't have parents to come home to or babysitters waiting for them at the last bell trailed upstairs and sent him sad eyes until he let them play fraction games or Mavis Beacon) and how, yeah, he'd love to help pick out a couple tech gifts for the next fun fair raffle, just shoot him an e-mail—or shoot Pepper an e-mail, because she'll actually respond to it.

Proof positive, as if anybody needed one, that he maybe didn't completely hate meetings as much as he hated missing his couch. (The suggestion of holding future PTA sessions over Skype was voted down twenty-three to one, however. Tony was, unsurprisingly, the one.)

And also, as a side note, Jane Foster-Odinson seriously made the world's best brownies.

"You guys, uh, really go all-out," Bucky commented.

Bucky'd worked on the Accelerated Reader team at his previous school, heading up the fourth-grade team and helping to coax newer teachers through the process. But like most things, the AR program'd been plagued by cliquish in-fighting so immature that Bucky'd been surprised it came from the teachers rather than the students.

This, he decided as he read over Phil's agenda for their AR meeting, was very different.

"No," Clint corrected as he dumped creamer into his coffee. "*Phil* goes all out. Just wait another month or two, then come over to our place. Charts on the wall, post-its with reminders, notebooks filled with crazy AR code. You'd think I married a bookie."

"You'd like that," Phil returned.

"You just like the fantasy where I break kneecaps for you, baby." And while Bucky laughed at Clint's eyebrow-waggle and flash-bang grin, Phil rolled his eyes.

Besides himself, Phil, and Clint, the AR team consisted of Bruce (who'd settled behind one of the desks already and was sorting through a fresh batch of photocopies for his class the next morning), a first-grade teacher with a shock of red hair named Jean, a third-grade teacher with an unpronounceable last name Bucky was still struggling his way around ("Like 'Aurora,'" she explained indulgently, "but with an 'o' at the end."), and a fourth-grade teacher named Wanda who, last Bucky'd seen her, had been arguing loudly on the phone with her teenaged son. They took turns filling up paper cups with coffee stolen from the teacher's lounge and claiming the desks that'd been moved from Clint's usual pod formation into a rough approximation of a circle.

"Please tell me we're not handing Stark spreadsheet duty this year," Wanda commented as she settled into a chair. Next to Bucky, Clint nearly snorted his coffee.

"I still don't know how he embedded commentary in the hover-over on every cell," Jean agreed.

"No spreadsheets for Stark," Phil assured them both as sat down. Clint perched on top of the desk next to him, and Bucky picked the seat between he and Bruce. "I don't want to keep any of you too long, because everyone has a lot to do—"

Any joke about to spring from Clint's mouth was quelled with a quick *look*, and Bucky bit down on his smile.

"—but I wanted to make sure we're all on the same page getting started. As classes come in for library time next week, I'll be talking to them about competition and handing out the first sets of

score sheets. Or, in the case of the younger ones, handing them out to teachers."

"You have to admit, Allison's 'unicorn and rainbow' drawing on every score sheet last year was a nice touch," Bruce offered with a tiny, sly smile.

"Until I had to add up the first-grade scores and couldn't read anything, sure," Jean replied.

"And until Stark could accuse everyone besides Bruce of cheating," Aurora-with-an-O added, which only caused Bruce's smile to grow.

"Right," Phil echoed, but his smile suggested that he hadn't minded the cheating debates.

"Next Monday, Darcy and one of our former students, Kate, are going to come up and help me relabel the last batch of books in the library," Phil continues. "As long as they don't get too distracted by nail art and Clint—"

"Hey!" Clint protested.

"—we should be ready to go by a week from Monday. I'm trying to work with the PTA and Fury to expand the monthly winners to include a quarterly and semester-long win, but there's some question as to whether the pizza budget can stretch that far."

Wanda sighed. "Maybe it's just me," she said, "and the fact I have two teenagers at home, but maybe it's time we tried something besides pizza. Extra recess, a movie day, some bartered-for computer lab time from Stark—"

Bruce snorted a tiny laugh. "Bribed-for, maybe."

"—home-baked PTA treats, *something* other than pizza."

"Those amazing Odinson brownies?" Clint suggested and, when Phil didn't immediately pick up his pen, leaned over to write it on Phil's legal pad *for* him.

Phil smacked his hand. "That might be a good compromise. I talked to Mister Odinson this morning—"

"Listened to him yell down the phone at you this morning," Jean murmured, and Aurora-with-a-O chuckled.

"—and he said that individual monthly winners will get extra tickets for some of the kid-friendly raffles at the fall fun fair. One of the prizes is an iPod."

"There are going to be brawls over that," Wanda pointed out.

"At the fun fair, yes," Phil admitted, "but it's on a Saturday. Hopefully, they'll work out most their drama before Monday."

Every teacher in the room turned to eye him, Bucky included.

"I said hopefully."

"I have to ask," Bucky finally said, putting down the painstakingly-prepared agenda to look over at Phil. "Is there a plan to help the special ed kids keep up? Maybe it's just me, but I always worried about that at my last school. It's probably not as big a deal with the little ones, but with the fourth- or fifth-graders, there might be more conflict."

"That's a P.C. way of putting it," Wanda said with a little smile.

"Carol's pretty on top of her kids, and she manages the other special ed teachers to make sure nobody feels left out," Phil explained. "The classroom teachers are pretty good at monitoring it, too, and there's a reason we have grade-level leaders to keep everything running smoothly."

"Next time you have an hour to kill, nab Wanda and ask her about the Great Dyslexia Battle of Aught-Eight." Wanda sat up a little straighter at Clint's proclamation, and Clint grinned. "Never before or since has a fourth-grader felt so bad about calling a classmate stupid."

"AR's serious business," Wanda declared, "and there's no way I'm letting anyone feel bad because they can't rack up the thousand points their speed-reader second-cousin can."

"She's the great equalizer," Aurora-with-an-o filled Bucky in with a slight wave of her hand.

"And terrifying," Bruce added quietly, and Wanda's laugh promptly filled the room.

They walked through the rest of Phil's agenda, mostly outlining processes and procedures for the upcoming AR launch. Phil encouraged each grade-leader to meet with the three other teachers at their grade level, as well as the appropriate special education teacher, to hammer out details before the frenzy started.

"Frenzy?" Bucky'd mouthed to Clint.

Clint's eyes had grown three times the size, and his nod was funeral-solemn. "Frenzy," he'd mouthed back.

After the meeting ended, Phil headed back to the library to lock up and double-check the library aide's work—"Micromanager," Clint accused, but his fingers lingered against Phil's arm as he nudged him in the direction of the door—and Bucky stuck around to help Clint rearrange his classroom. "He takes this pretty seriously," Bucky noted as he shoved desks back into their pods.

Clint nodded. "The way he tells it," he said, upturning chairs as he went, "one of the conferences he attended when he was getting his master's basically called library science a dying art and suggested they start going digital. I mean, before we even had the Kindle, they said this." He shrugged. "He loves the kids, and he loves what he does. And if it gets kids reading, it's worth it."

"And nobody worries about kids getting left out?" Bucky asked. Clint raised an eyebrow, and Bucky shook his head. "I probably worry too much about it, but any time you assign points, I just always feel like the end result is somebody ends up feeling awful about it. I mean, I wasn't a great reader when I was their age, and my only learning disability was that I was a stubborn little asshole."

Clint laughed. "We worry about it," he admitted after a couple seconds, "but I think about it this way: for every one kid who might feel left out, there's at least one of us keeping an eye on the whole situation. There's a whole classroom of kids with scores that'll keep them in the running for prizes, there's a special education teacher with her own prizes squirreled away in her desk, and there's Phil. And the second anybody's snotty about it," he added, "Wanda'll light them on fire."

Bucky snorted and shook his head. "Literally, or figuratively?"

"On her behalf," Clint replied, holding up his hands, "I plead the fifth."

"Alright, let's get settled, people." Fury's voice rang out over the group of staff members clustered

in the library for the monthly team lead meeting. There was a representative from each grade level, as well as one for the specials teachers and one for the Special Education team.

Clint snagged one last cookie from the tray before taking his seat between Phil and Carol. His husband gave him a side-eye. "How many of those have you had?" he asked.

"Not enough," Clint answered.

Carol leaned around him with a predatory smile. "If you're worried he's going to pack on extra pounds, he could always go running with me after school instead of you, Phil."

Clint's head snapped to Phil. "Don't let her do that. Please. You'll become a widower, you know you will."

Phil gave a long-suffering sigh and shook his head at the pair of them. "My only concern is that the sudden sugar intake is going to cause him to bounce off the walls, and since the walls in here are covered with my books, I'm trying to contain a mess."

"Sounds like that's a constant theme in your relationship," Carol snarked.

"Can we get started please?" Fury demanded, glaring the trio down with his one eye. Clint raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and caught Bruce hiding a smile behind his hand at the next table over. "Alright, we have an hour to get through everything or some teacher's union is going to throw a fit at me for keeping you too long.

"Welcome back, everyone, to our first team lead meeting of the school year, and a special welcome to the newcomers. Joining us this year we have Ororo representing the third grade and Carol taking the lead for SpEd."

There was a smattering of polite applause, and Clint elbowed Carol in the side. "Congratulations on getting sucked in to a ton more work for barely any more pay."

She returned the elbow and smiled when Clint almost doubled over in pain. "Thanks, pal."

"Now that we've talked about who's new in here," Fury continued, "let's talk about the other new faces on the staff." He paused to turn to Missus Howard, the graying first grade team leader. "How are things going with Mister Parker?"

The older woman took a deep breath, and it was evident from the look on her face that she was choosing her words carefully. "He certainly gets along with the kids well. He just needs a little more focus."

Fury smirked at the answer. "I'm sure you are more than willing to help keep him in line."

Clint let his eyes flicker back and forth between the pair of them. He could always tell when he had a kid from Howard's class sitting at one of his desks. Four years later, and they were still sometimes too scared to ask questions or share their opinion with the class. He'd heard Jessica Drew wonder out loud if she needed to bring Pepper in to deal with PTSD cases once the kids moved on to second grade.

But on the other hand, Clint had heard numerous stories about the student teacher, Peter, over the years from May. If the kid had to be paired up with anyone on the staff, the resident Nazi drill instructor may not be a bad choice.

"And what about Miss Henson?" Fury asked the first grade team lead.

Mrs. Howard's shoulders rose and fell in an uninterested shrug. "I don't understand why there needs to be so much singing and dancing going on to learn things, but I suppose she's doing alright."

Fury turned his attention to Jessica Drew. "How's Mister Barnes working out?"

The young woman shrugged her shoulders. "I haven't heard any complaints from anyone. Helps that he already has a number of years of experience under his belt. And he hasn't killed the Odinson kid yet, which is more than I could say if he'd ended up on my roster."

Fury raised an eyebrow in the second grade teacher's direction. "You didn't happen to use some sort of influencing powers over my office staff to make sure he wasn't in your class, did you?"

Jessica's face was a textbook example of innocence—something Clint had grown to understand as a warning sign for trouble. "I have no idea what you're talking about," Jessica answered. Carol's shoulders vibrated next to Clint in silent laughter.

The principal shook his head. "Moving on. I've got complaints from the janitorial staff that the upstairs bathrooms by Barton's room are getting clogged with random objects and overflowing."

Clint felt his stomach go sour as Phil leaned over to whisper at him, "The Hills?"

The fifth grade teacher shook his head. "Doesn't sound like their MO, but they may be going all out this year. Who knows."

Fury continued. "It seems to be happening in the morning between the time fourth and third grades are switching for specials."

Wanda, who was seated on Bruce's right, muttered something under her breath before speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you," Fury answered. He rose to hand out packets of information. "You don't get to keep these just yet; we'll be discussing them in our staff meeting in two weeks. But since I just got these today, I wanted you all to have a look."

Clint accepted a stapled set of papers and immediately flipped towards the back. In his hands was the newly printed breakdown of scores from last school year's state assessment. His index finger traced down the page until it stopped on the reading data for fifth grade. He pulled a face as Phil looked over his shoulder to read the information.

"Your kids scored higher than the state average, and had the second highest reading scores for fifth grade for the district. Quit pouting."

"They could've done better. And you know I'm going to hear it from Van Dyne about how her fifth graders read better than mine."

Phil rolled his eyes. "Janet teaches at the most affluent school in the district. They hardly have any English as a Second Language students. She'd better have the top score."

"Yeah," Clint muttered, but his eyes were focused on which sections within the reading questions were the weakest for his kids last year. His brain quickly began thinking of mini-exercises on those topics to reinforce information with this year's kids.

"Overall," Fury said over the sounds of pages being flipped, "I'm quite pleased with how we did last year. I know you all will want to do better, and that you're going to push our kids to do better this year."

"Do we know if there are going to be any changes to this year's assessment? Anything we should prepare for?" Ororo asked.

"Only rumors I'm hearing are another set of changes for what is and isn't acceptable resources for SpEd students to use," Fury answered, pointing his look at Carol.

She sighed. "Great. Any chance they'll know for sure before they actually give us the tests in May or are we going to have to cover our ass—I mean *selves*? I don't want my team threatened with accusations of cheating and letters about having our licenses removed."

"It hasn't gotten that bad," Fury countered.

"Yet," Carol responded under breath.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there. Try not to stress about it too much. I know that's like telling Stark to stop fixing his hair every time he walks past a reflective surface, but oh well." Fury looked down at his notes. "Let's go around the room with updates. What do you all have for me?"

There wasn't too much to discuss since they were now easing into the lull that always followed the madness of getting a school year started. Staff and students alike were getting into their new routine.

Phil brought everyone up to speed on his first AR meeting of the year and how things were progressing with that. Clint took the opportunity to share his plans for the upcoming canned food drive he and Steve put on every year at the beginning of November in order to get groceries to some of the lower income families in the area by the time Thanksgiving rolled around. "We all know the real battle is going to be for any place below third since there's no doubt Thor is going to be bringing in palettes of canned vegetables to make sure his kids' classes take the top spots."

Bruce smiled at him. "The one upside to having an Odinson in your class."

Fury went on to discuss how the PTA agreed to give some discretionary funds to go towards technology for the school, and Clint watched out of the corner of his eye as Phil made a note in his phone to talk to Tony about that.

"Anything else?" Fury asked from the group. When they were all silent, he rose from his chair.

"I'm going to need those assessment data packets back since they haven't been officially released yet. You will deny seeing them if anyone asks."

Clint skimmed through the data once more in an effort to burn the information into his brain before Fury came around to him, but the numbers were all starting to swirl around each other.

Phil leaned in to whisper in his ear again. "I snuck pictures of it on my phone; don't worry about it."

"That is so hot."

Stop Pining

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the gang shows their exasperation for Steve and Bucky not doing anything about each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky made a mad grab for his messenger bag in the back seat before climbing out of his car. Giving up any pretense of looking professional, he jogged through the parking lot. Thankfully it was a Friday, which meant he wasn't wearing his tractionless dress shoes. He weaved between buses and let out a sigh of relief when he saw that the students hadn't been let into the school building yet.

Natasha, who, in preparation for bus duty, was standing between Phil and Steve, caught his eye and quirked an eyebrow at him while barely containing a smirk. He raised his hands in defense as he stopped in front of the trio.

"Not my fault," he explained. "Three car pileup on the interstate and I still don't know how to get from one side of the county to the other using back roads." Phil gave him a sympathetic grimace before Bucky started moving around them and into the office.

He didn't bother to turn around when Natasha called out after him. "You brought stuff for tonight, right?"

He gave her a thumbs-up while keeping his forward momentum. He gave Darcy a hurried nod that she returned while furiously scribbling notes about whichever student was sick and not attending school today. Grabbing whatever papers were in his mailbox, he stuffed them under his arm and began his way down the hall to his room.

His next-door neighbor and team lead, Jessica Drew, was standing in the hall all ready to man her post for morning hall monitoring. Her eyebrows went up in surprise when she realized Bucky was just arriving. He rolled his eyes in return. "Know anyone who can teleport? Because I've just about had it with commuting."

"Not anyone off the top of my head," she answered with a chuckle.

He managed to unlock his door, put papers on his desk, and throw his bag behind his chair before the kids started piling in. He swore under his breath when they began to point out that their morning work papers weren't already laid out on their desks. Improvising, he wrote out a couple story problems on the board as a replacement.

His morning commute was a sign for how the rest of his day unfolded. It included, but was not limited to: all three copiers being down (followed by copious amounts of emails between Darcy and Tony to the entire staff debating about whose responsibility between the two of them it was to get things fixed), spilling soup on his shirt at lunch because he burned himself on the bowl when removing it from the microwave, a phone call to a set of parents whose daughter snuck some of her

mother's very nice jewelry into school for a show and tell day, and Word eating the latest update of next week's lesson plans after he spent all of his planning period adjusting them.

It was the first time in the school year that Bucky was extremely grateful to give one last high five to his students and put his kids on their buses. He needed a break; he needed to spend a weekend without lesson plans and curriculum lurking in the back of his mind. Hence, his weekend plans.

Natasha promised to make good on her vodka bet. The plan was for Bucky to go home with her, where the pair would inevitably end up playing a drinking game, and Bucky would wake up the following morning cursing his existence. Russians must be immune to vodka hangovers; at least, that's what Bucky'd believed after knowing Natasha for about a decade.

On the way back into the school from bus duty, Bucky passed Steve and gave him a grin. Steve returned the gesture, but it didn't quite reach the other man's blue eyes. Bucky had developed a new habit of sneaking glances through windows and doors across the hall into the art room. If they caught each other's eyes, there was usually a small grin or a quick nod, but Steve seemed to be displaying a hesitancy in the motion today.

Bucky wanted to stop and ask him if everything was alright, but Natasha passed him and purposefully bumped her body into his. "Five minutes to get your stuff together, and then we're out of here."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

Once back in his classroom, he stood and observed the mess that was left behind after a full week with second graders. A handful of the desks already had papers and books crammed inside nearly to the point of overflowing. Bucky had to look away so as not to give in to his need for neatness and order. He promised himself he'd come in super early on Monday to straighten things up and get his room ready for the day.

Well, knowing how benders with Natasha went, he might just fly by the seat of his pants on Monday and then come in super early on Tuesday.

He grabbed his messenger bag, locked his room, and turned to find Tony and Steve getting ready to enter the art room. "Taking off?" Steve asked.

Bucky nodded. "Nat and I are going to try and relive our college days. It could be a huge mistake. If I don't show up for work on Monday, send the cops to her condo as the first place to search for my body, because there's a high chance she's killed me with her crazy Russian stamina."

"You and Nat?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Bucky quickly rethought the extended details of their plans he was going to share when he saw a pair of giggling first grade girls coming down around the corner to go to the cafeteria. "We're having a kind of adult sleepover."

Tony's face lit up and he inhaled to spew some comment, but physically bit his tongue to keep himself from blurting it out. Once the young girls were definitely out of earshot, he hastily commented, "Are you guys going to braid each other's hair while watching porn? Is that what you mean?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Stark. That's exactly what I mean." He then gave the technology teacher a look that screamed skepticism. "Did you actually show physical restraint in making a sexually-charged comment?"

Tony shrugged. "Pepper withholds sex if she hears I've made explicit comments in front of the kids. And, granted, I don't necessarily need her to get off, but she's so bendy and—"

"Please stop talking," Steve interrupted with a pained tone in his voice. "I need to be able to look your wife in the eye the next time I talk to her."

"James!" Natasha's voice rang out down the hall from near the cafeteria. "Ready?" she asked with a predatory smile.

Bucky felt his stomach twist. He was absolutely screwed. That feral grin let him know that yes, there was going to be a drinking game as part of the night's activities. And yes, she was going to slaughter both him and his liver. The sane part of his brain questioned why he'd agreed to this, but he ignored it.

"Am I following you back to your place?"

She shrugged. "You can leave your car here if you want."

He shook his head. "I'd rather drive it back to your condo."

"No one's going to steal your piece of crap car."

"It's still *my* piece of crap car, and I want to have it around."

"Suit yourself, but hurry up. I have plans." She raised a single red eyebrow as a challenge before turning and sashaying down the hall.

"Something's different," Tony muttered while staring down her retreating form. "She's different today."

Bucky looked at him with confusion before turning back to watch Nat walk back around the corner. His eyes caught on the slightly exaggerated swing of her hips, and his memory flashed to the enhanced shine that had been in her eyes this morning. He'd mistaken it as her glee for an opportunity to rib him for showing up late, but now that he thought about it, he recognized it as something else.

"Sex," Bucky proclaimed, the word falling out of his mouth. He felt a smirk cross his face. All day, when he wasn't feeling like a headless chicken, he'd pondered what line of attack to take during Drink the Truth with Nat tonight. He needed a line of statements to follow in order for her to give up information and down shots of vodka, and now he had it.

The smirk turned into a full-blown grin and chuckle. "See you guys," he said as he followed Nat's path down the hallway, eyes locked on the point where she'd turned the corner.

"Stop pining," Tony said once he trailed into Steve's classroom.

Steve sighed. "I thought you were helping me rearrange the tables," he commented. He was already stacking chairs into the corner, moving more swiftly than usual. He liked to move his classroom around for different units. The painting unit—involving water colors for the younger kids but *actual* acrylic paint and miniature canvases for the older ones—was a prime example; multiple long rows of tables were, if nothing else, easier to cover in tarps.

He'd learned that the hard way his first year.

The fact that focusing on the tables and chairs was a way to *not* focus on the sinking feeling in his stomach counted as a bonus. And heaving furniture around kept him from replaying the hallway conversation on an endless loop in his head.

"I was. Then, I saw you pining just now, with puppy-dog eyes and fluttery eyelashes. Disney princess style, actually. I mean, I knew you were being all weirdly quiet and squirrely lately, but that display just took the cake." Tony planted himself in one of the tiny chairs, then crossed his arms. "Stop blushing like a virgin bride and ask him out."

"Who?" Steve replied dumbly. He refused to look at Tony, though. Another thing he'd learned the hard way was that looking at Tony could very well be his downfall.

"We're not playing this game."

"No, I'm moving tables and you're not helping."

"Steve."

"Tony?"

"Steeeeevee."

Steve sighed again and, ignoring the twitch in his left eyebrow, twisted to glance over at Tony. He looked ridiculous, a grown man in a chair meant for a second-grader. When he tilted his head like a curious pug, he nearly smacked his chin into one of his tucked-up knees.

They stared each other down for entire seconds before Steve asked, "Don't you have a computer lab to clean?"

"My lab," Tony reported with a grin, "is in the most pristine of conditions, thanks mostly to five fourth-grade detentioners who are now very sorry they even *thought* about attempting to sneak food past me." He waved a hand vaguely. "Plus, Coulson kicked me out of the library."

"Should I ask?"

"I told him I digitized the card catalogue again."

"Did you?"

"No!" He snapped, and Steve rolled his eyes. "That, my friend, is the beauty of a lie. Now, let's continue talking about your pining."

"I'm not pining," Steve insisted.

"Okay, fine. Not pining. Pining's the wrong word." Steve turned back around to the table, shoving it a few inches to line it up with the others. He reached for a chair in hopes of placing it back under the table, but there was no use; within seconds, Tony hopped to his feet and stood between Steve and the scattered furniture.

He started at Steve like he was a lab specimen before he said, "Let's call it 'checking out hot new Mister Barnes.'"

Steve tilted his head toward the ceiling. "Really, Tony?"

"Undressing him with your eyes."

"Now you're getting ridiculous."

"Wanting to get up close and personal with his smoked sau—"

"You didn't miss the part where he and Natasha are *obviously* more than just friends, right?" Steve cut in. His voice sounded sharp to his own ears, and he winced. Tony, however, grinned. Steve realized only a second too late that Tony'd been waiting for that, the first sign he'd successfully worn Steve down.

Steve sighed and reached around him for a chair. "They're always bickering and laughing together," he continued, ignoring the other man's steady gaze, "and they're practically joined at the hip. It was bad enough at the dodge ball game, when he went after Nat all sweaty and full of adrenaline—not exactly an unclear sign, you know."

He looked at where he was still holding onto the back of the chair. "I thought I might be wrong about it," he admitted, shaking his head, "but I'm not sure anymore. Because in the hallway, they were just—"

He tried to dismiss the thought entirely, but it was hard. A deaf person could have heard the teasing, sexually-charged lilts to Bucky and Natasha's voices in the hallway, and that was ignoring the actual *words*. Adult sleepovers, Natasha acting differently, the little lift in Bucky's voice when he said "sex"?

He was still testing the waters with Bucky, trying to find the best way to get to know him. Not in the Biblical sense, either, but in an attempt to become friends. He kept trying to find time to talk to him, to share smiles when they managed to make eye contact in the hallway, to develop common ground. He'd thought originally that maybe he could pave the way to *something* else, but now?

Well, Steve wasn't stupid enough to think anything else was on the table. Not when Bucky was clearly in a relationship of some kind with Natasha.

When he looked up, it was in time to see Tony raising his eyebrows. "Wait, are you—" The other man's finger waved an unclear pattern in the air. "Are you admitting this is kind of a thing? Like, are you admitting that you think cute new guy is cute in a way that isn't just intellectual? Is that—" He paused, blinking. "Was I right?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Because this is about you."

"No, hang on, lemme bask in this for a second. 'Cause Pepper said—"

"You talked to Pepper about this?"

Tony paused in his "basking" to roll his own eyes. "It's *Pepper*. Remember? I tell her everything? Even the little dirty secrets that I wouldn't even tell my priest?"

"You're not Catholic."

"Point stands." Tony pulled himself up on the counter under the window and kept watching Steve. "Pepper said I was crazy."

"I'm not sure I disagree," Steve deadpanned, reaching for another chair.

"But if you're pining, then—"

"Tony." Steve set the chair down hard on the floor and looked up. Tony wasn't frowning,

necessarily, but he wasn't smiling either. It was a tight, almost half-neutral expression, like his mind was still swirling through the possibilities. Good. "He's attractive. He clearly cares about the kids."

"Match made in he—"

"And he is also," Steve pressed, "obviously involved. Or friends with benefits. Or *something*." When Tony opened his mouth, he held up a hand. "And if he's not yet, he will be. And I'm not stupid enough to mess with something Natasha wants."

Tony frowned. "Seemed to me she was running away from what she supposedly wants. In the gym during dodge ball, at least. When he was sweating through his tank-top and—"

Steve sighed. "Let it go, Tony."

"You know he's not the only dick-bearing guy on the planet, right? And that maybe he could've been talking about somebody else's dick? Or even somebody else's *not*-dick, because there's lots of other options—"

"Really, Tony, let it go."

"C'mon, Steve, buddy, you can't just—"

"Tony." Their eyes met, and Tony's eager grin slipped. *Finally*, Steve thought, but he refrained from saying it. "Please. Just let it go."

After meeting up at Natasha's condo to drop off Bucky's stuff and for Natasha to change out of her P.E. garb, the pair piled into Natasha's car and headed out for the evening. They discussed how their weeks went over sushi before making their way out to the cheap theater to catch some action flick both had been too busy to see when it first came out. The movie was told from the point of view of a soldier, and Natasha's shoulders shook from silent chuckling whenever Bucky rolled his eyes at a glaring mistake. "That's not what happens," he caught himself muttering more than once.

On the way out, they ran into a couple of families from the school who were there to see the latest Pixar film. Bucky didn't recognize the kids, but they knew Natasha, and she put on her polite face to shake hands with parents and have a thirty-second conversation with the kids about how they liked their movie.

They then left the theater and went back to Natasha's, where they both changed into t-shirts and sleep shorts if for no other reason than they would be comfortably dressed when they passed out. Well, Bucky would be at least. Natasha's blood seemed to be made at least partly of vodka and would probably see tonight as some sort of healthy infusion.

They settled down at the round dining room table, the overhead light making Bucky feel like he was sitting in an interrogation chamber more than his friend's home. Natasha set out a pair of shot glasses and a bottle. Nothing on the label was in English, and Bucky wondered—not for the first time—where she got the stuff. He wouldn't be the least bit surprised if process wasn't entirely legal. Whenever they went out shopping for liquor together, Natasha would scoff at the shelves of vodkas with flavors like whipped cream and birthday cake. She would then swear darkly in her native tongue and walk straight past the bottles like any true Russian would.

"Drink the Truth?" Nat asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

He nodded. "Like we ever play any other kind of drinking game."

The rules were simple, and something they'd established freshman year at college. Each person took turns making a declarative statement about an opponent. If the statement turned out to be true, the opponent took a shot; if it was false, the person making the accusation took the drink. The winner was the last person standing, which was never Bucky. Except that one time in junior year, but Natasha was in the middle of fighting off strep throat. He still counted it as a victory.

"You wanna start?" she asked.

"Can we eat something first? Dinner was three hours ago and wasn't that substantial."

"You ate two whole rolls."

"I'm a growing boy, Nat."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. If you need to play like a little girl, you know where I keep the food."

He swore under his breath and poured them each a drink. She was going to eat him alive, but he was at least going to go down like a man. "Best of luck," he said as they toasted and downed an initial shot together to get the game started. "Ladies first."

She eyed him a moment before diving in. "You're happier here than you ever were at your other school."

"You know it's against the rules to make an obvious statement. What form of punishment shall I make up..."

She held out an index finger at him to let him know she wasn't finished. "And it's not just because you get to hang out with me."

The corner of his mouth twitched as he tried to keep a straight face. It was true. He was glad to have been welcomed into this crazy circle of friends. He saluted her with his shot glass before taking his drink. The flavorless liquid went down smoothly, yet another warning sign for how much pain he was going to be in come morning.

As he refilled, he thought about where to start his line of questioning. He knew he couldn't gun straight for the topic of sex immediately, mostly because it would set her off and whatever mercy Natasha might show right now would evaporate in a second.

"You could still do a back flip on the balance beam if you wanted."

Natasha rolled her eyes as she took her drink. "Trying to punish me with my own awesomeness? Really, James?"

He shrugged. "Taking advantage of what I know works."

She shook her head while she poured herself a drink. "If you want to play it that way, then fine." She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands while staring at him thoughtfully for a moment. "You're dying to ask Steve out but won't do it until he makes some kind of move first."

He worked his jaw back and forth before taking his shot. Sometimes this game wasn't very fun to play with someone who knew you so well. Knowing she wouldn't let up on the path of the topic she started down, and feeling the alcohol's warmth start to spread from his stomach into his face, he decided now was as good a time as any to start in.

"You had sex last night," he declared. He was rewarded with her eyes widening slightly and the corners of her mouth turning down in the faintest of frowns before she took her shot. Bucky laughed and rubbed his palms together in giddy anticipation for his next turn.

Natasha glared him down, but it did little to damper his joy. "You've had fantasies involving Steve and those tables in his room."

He rolled his eyes before taking his shot. "A guy having sexual fantasies—real original, Nat." Bucky refilled his glass before taking his turn, feeling certain of his next claim. "You had a one night stand."

"Drink up," she answered.

He sputtered before downing his shot. "You have got to be shitting me. Since when do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not your turn," she responded, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs. "You're treating this like one of your usual crushes, and if Steve doesn't make a move within the next couple of weeks, you're going to drop the whole thing without asking him out yourself."

He heaved a sigh before taking his drink.

"James," she said, leaning forward once more, "grow a pair and ask him out."

"So I can humiliate myself and make things awkward with the guy across the hall from me before we're even done with the first nine weeks of the school year? Pass."

"Wuss."

"And proud of it. Now back to you." He paused to refill his shot glass and tried to swallow the effects the alcohol increasing in his system. He was down five shots to three. Normally that wouldn't be so bad, but this was Natasha's lethal version of Russian moonshine. "You have a boyfriend that you haven't told me about."

"Drink," she ordered with a wave of her hand.

"Are you serious?" he whined before downing another round of vodka.

"Are you really surprised?"

"No," he answered suddenly solemnly. Nat didn't use the term *boyfriend* because Nat didn't date. At least not anyone seriously, not after Alex. The two of them were together for all four years of college, Alex and Bucky went off to serve their military duties, and Alex's plane crashed a year later. People who met Nat after that happened assumed her icy, hard demeanor was from her upbringing, and while that wasn't totally untrue, Bucky knew something inside of her calloused over when she lost Alex.

"So," Bucky started, not wanting their evening to trudge down the path of broken hearts and bitter memories, "if it's not a one night stand and he's not your boyfriend, what are you calling this?"

She thought about her answer for a moment before replying, "Let's throw it under the heading of Friends with Benefits."

He nodded before giving her a look of skepticism. "Did you just give me a freebie?"

"I'm taking pity on account of how glassy your eyes are looking right now."

He shrugged. "I'll take what I can get. Your turn."

She traced the rim of her shot glass with her middle finger while she thought out her next attack. "When you start dating Steve—"

"*If* I start dating Steve."

"*When* you start dating Steve, you won't tell your family about him for at least two months."

Bucky nodded before taking his shot. "If you had an Italian mother and four sisters, you'd understand my reasons." He took a moment to be still in an attempt to clear his fuzzy mind for his next turn. "Is this mystery man someone I know?"

She grinned at him, and Bucky felt his stomach sour. "I'm sorry, James, but you just broke the rules of the game by asking a question instead of making a statement. That means a double shot for you."

He groaned at the realization of his mistake. Not only would he know have consumed three times the amount of vodka as Natasha, but he'd essentially pissed away a chance to gain some new information.

Natasha let out a small laugh. "You're just about done aren't you?"

"Double shot for you!"

"That wasn't what I was going to say for my turn and you know it."

He shrugged. "Had to try."

She leaned back in her chair once more. "You and Steve will name your first daughter after me as a thank you for introducing you two to each other."

"Never. Drink."

It was Natasha's turn to shrug. "I was thirsty anyway."

The last statement Bucky remembered making for the evening was "Your mystery man is someone I know." He wasn't too sure when he woke up the next morning, mostly because what little of his brain that wasn't in searing pain was concerned that Natasha had finally made him blind with her heinous bootleg vodka, but he thought he remembered her taking a shot after his sentence.

"The fuck is wrong with you, lately?"

Carol demanded it Monday afternoon while Steve blotted paint out of the carpet, and he hit his head on the underside of the table before ducking out to stare at her. She planted her hands on her hips. "You're weird and scattered and I don't like it."

Steve rolled his eyes. "I'm not weird, I'm busy."

"No, I've seen you busy, and busy isn't crawling around under tables and picking at three-year-old globs of dried paste in your best khakis. What is actually wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Steve retorted, and then crawled back under the table.

After a few seconds of blissful silence, he assumed she left, mostly because there was no way Carol could both stay in the room *and* stay quiet. He gathered up his damp rag and bucket of soapy water before scooting back out from under the table.

Arguably, this was his first mistake. Because when he looked up, Carol was still looming in the doorway.

He nearly banged his head a second time. "What?" he asked as he stood.

"Just trying to get a read on you," she retorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "I mean, how long've we known each other?"

"A couple years," he answered.

"Right. And how many times in those couple years have you been this weird?"

"I'm not being weird," he reminded her. He set the bucket and rag on the table. "I've just been—"

"Preoccupied?" Carol prompts. "Staring off into the distance at staff meetings and group get-togethers? Fidgeting extra-hard when Stark and Barton start their 'we swear we don't have sexual tension' innuendo-offs?" Steve started collecting unused paint brushes and dropping them into their assigned coffee cans. "Is this about a girl?"

Despite his better judgment, Steve snorted half a laugh. "Trust me," he informed her, "it's not about a girl."

He moved through the room, gathering brushes in his fist and trying not to meet Carol's eyes. The problem was definitely not a woman. No, the problem was his stupid mind, the one that'd spent half the weekend thinking about Bucky and Natasha's "adult sleepover."

He'd popped a beer Friday after work and wondered about their drinking together. He'd laid in bed and found himself wondering about what kind of "sleepover" they were really having. And, while channel surfing on Saturday afternoon, he'd caught part of a college football game that reminded him of the last betting pool night and Bucky's pesto pizza.

He felt like a teenager with his first crush.

And he spent most of Monday avoiding Bucky, afraid of meeting his eyes and seeing the satisfaction of a weekend with Natasha settled there.

He dumped the last few brushes into a coffee can just as Carol asked, "Is it about a *guy*?"

The question caught him off guard enough that when he twisted around to gape at her, he smacked his hand into the coffee can and sent it flying. Brushes arced into the air, scattered all over the floor, and the can impacted the wall with a metallic thud.

He wanted to turn around and start picking them up, instead of indulging Carol, but Carol was *smiling*.

"Come on," she chided, "do you really think I'm *that* blonde?"

"I— But—" And when words managed to fail him entirely, he stepped away from the table and started gathering up the fallen brushes. He couldn't, however, ignore the heat in his cheeks and rimming his ears. "It's not about anyone."

"Look." Even without turning around, Steve could hear the *click* of Carol closing the door behind her. "I don't know who's gotten into your head like this, whether it's some church mouse girl or hot little gym rat or *whatever* you're into. But you are throwing off some serious *Grey's Anatomy* 'pick me, want me, love me' vibes and people are starting to notice."

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Tony doesn't count as a person."

"Tony," she pointed out, "has an enormous fucking mouth."

Steve turned back around.

"And really," Carol continued, stepping into his peripheral vision and bending down to pick up a couple of the brushes, "my point's still valid."

"What point?"

"That every red-blooded American girl in her right mind would want a piece of a hot, built, single guy like you." She stood up and offered him the handful of brushes. "Or red-blooded American boy. Red-headed Russian girl?"

Steve laughed. "Definitely not that last one," he promised, shaking his head. "I think that's more Bucky's territory, honestly."

Abruptly, Carol cackled. "Oh, baby, *no*," she said, drawing out the vowel. Steve blinked, and not only at being called "baby." "Trust me, I have poked sticks into that beehive at hot yoga three times in the last month. There is no secret love story there."

"Hot yoga?"

"I'd suggest you try it, but not if you don't want to see a bunch of thirty-ish women sweating through their tank tops." She picked up the coffee can and weighed it between her hands. "No, whoever's keeping Natasha happy is definitely not your yummy hall mate."

Steve opened his mouth to respond, but Carol tossed the can in his direction before he could put the words together. He watched as she strode toward the door, confident and self-possessed as always.

He was just about finished putting the brushes all back in the can when she called out, "You could just ask him out for a coffee. After a long day of Odinson-wrangling, he'd probably like a coffee."

Steve, to his credit, did not knock the can over a second time.

"Please tell me you have a date. That'd be *amazing*."

Steve groaned aloud. "Darcy," he complained, but Darcy promptly ignored him.

The path to Darcy's heart, Steve'd learned long ago, went directly through either her stomach or her fingernails, and Steve had stocked up on supplies to win both parts over. He'd loomed in the cosmetic aisle at Walgreens for fifteen minutes before an earnest-looking clerk asked if he needed help finding "whatever his wife sent him for"; he'd blushed and babbled before randomly selecting a couple different nail polish design brush *things* and heading for the junk food section. Darcy'd already fawned over the colors he picked out—being an art teacher did, at times, come in handy—and stuck her nose into the trenta-sized caramel mocha with extra whip, a sure sign he could at least ask his question with impunity.

He just wanted the name of a decent coffee shop besides Starbucks.

He hadn't expected it to set off some kind of terrifying alarm bells in Darcy's sixth sense.

"I don't have a date," he informed her, adjusting his bag over his shoulder. For some inexplicable reason, he'd thought coming in early would transform their conversation into something embarrassing. How wrong he was. "I just need a break from Starbucks."

"Steve, you don't know a macchiato from a cappuccino," Darcy pointed out.

"Uh, what?"

"Have you even tried a triple-shot mocha breve with java flakes?"

"A who?"

"Exactly." Darcy leaned back in her chair and swung her feet up onto the corner of her desk. "You're not asking for you."

"Lewis, those better not be your goddamn heels I see!" Fury shouted from his office.

Darcy dropped her feet back down onto the floor. "I swear to god he was not in there five minutes ago," she muttered.

Steve sighed. He'd already felt incredibly stupid even asking the question, and now, he knew for a fact his ears were burning beet red. "Look," he said, spreading out his hands, "just forget I said anything. It's not important."

"Oh, it's *totally* important," she retorted. She crossed her arms under her breasts. "You're Mister Rogers. You're ice cream, lollipops, kittens, and warm home-knit holiday-themed sweaters. You don't ask for help unless you *need* it."

For lack of a better response, Steve asked, "Uh, is that a compliment?"

"And you don't," she stressed, pointing a finger at him, "drink coffee. At least, not real coffee."

"I drink the coffee in the teacher's lounge," he pointed out.

"That's not *coffee*, that's toxic waste." Darcy picked up her drink and took a few greedy gulps before continuing. "Look, I don't know what kind of scene you're into—I mean, they don't really make coffee shops for people who wear cardigans in earnest—"

"Thanks."

"—but I can give you a few options. There's For the Love of the Bean, which is very organic-vegan-free-trade and a little terrifying for guys like you, there's Coffee-mopolitan, there's Better Living Through Java, there's P.R.—"

"P.R.?" Steve echoed. He wasn't sure what surprised him more: the fact that there were so many coffee shops in the immediate vicinity, or the fact he was actually familiar with all those ridiculous names.

Darcy stopped ticking off shops on her fingers to peer at him. "You've never heard of P.R.?"

"Public relations?"

"Prime Roasts. God, okay, I know you're like thirty but that's *no* excuse. Prime Roasts is just about the best place in town, they do this amazing house blend that I swear has given me an o—"

"Wait, is that the shop run out of that old gas station?" Steve asked. Darcy nodded emphatically and sipped her coffee. "I've driven past there a couple times. It seems kind of . . . "

"Amazing?"

"Elitist."

He stepped back as Darcy sputtered, nearly choking on her ridiculous (and expensive) coffee drink. The pens on her desk jumped as she slammed the paper cup down. "There is nothing elitist about beautifully roasted beans imported from overseas that taste like the pure laughter of babies sound!" she declared. "Okay, if you are asking some hot girl out, you ask her to go *there* with you, because even if you don't appreciate it, she will want to have your children after five minutes in that beautiful wet dream of a coffee shop, you—"

"Uh, okay, am I interrupting something?" a new voice asked, and Steve's heart leapt into the back of his throat when he realized who exactly the voice belonged to. In the doorway, Bucky finger-waved at he and Darcy, an awkward smile caught on his face. "It's a little intense in here."

"Because Steve's *wrong*," Darcy snapped. Bucky grinned as he moved toward his teacher's mailbox. "Here, okay, prove with me how wrong he is: you've been to Prime Roasts, right?"

"Who hasn't?" Bucky asked. He stopped, his hand sitting just inside his mailbox. "Why?"

"Steve's looking for an actual coffee shop, but he thinks P.R. sounds like a hipster dive."

"I did not say that," Steve defended while Bucky burst out laughing. He watched the other man collect the various papers from inside his box. "I just said that I thought it might be a little elitist. Calling it 'P.R.' doesn't really help."

"It's totally elitist, that's why it's fun," Bucky replied. He rolled up the flyers that were formerly in his box and smacked Steve in the shoulder. "We should go some time."

Steve opened his mouth for a second, but absolutely no sound came out. He managed to salvage the expression by smiling. "Yeah, sure," he replied, and Bucky winked as he wandered out of the office.

At her desk, Darcy sighed. "He's going to be pretty bummed when he finds out you're scoping the place out for your new hottie," she informed him as she kicked her legs up onto the desk.

"Lewis!" Fury shouted from his office, and at least Steve could laugh as he walked out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

For rules on how to play Drink the Truth, go here:
<http://saranoh.tumblr.com/post/45645552913/drink-the-truth>

October 12

Chapter Notes

The fun part of building an AU is delving into the new versions of the characters' histories. We want to take the opportunity to do that with everyone, and this is our first chance to do so.

So while this story is about Steve and Bucky, please give us a minute (or several) for the_wordbutler and I to express our love for Clint and Phil.

Around October 12 – Seven Years Ago

"Coulson?"

Phil froze, his glass halfway to his lips, and for a moment, he considered taking up prayer. A last name usually wasn't a harbinger of doom, but then, most people weren't elementary school librarians. More specifically, most people weren't elementary school librarians who, not three days ago, finished up his first round of parent-teacher conferences.

He set down his glass on the table and turned around very slowly.

"Hey, I thought so!" Barton greeted, flashing a bright, toothy smile. Clint, Phil reminded himself, a fifth-grader teacher at his new school. He still felt some days that he'd never learn everyone's names, but Clint'd stuck out in part because of his reputation—it seemed every student knew *something* of Mr. Barton—and half because of his aversion to sleeves. He displayed the aversion now, in a threadbare Iowa Hawkeyes t-shirt and a pair of battered jeans.

It was the first time Phil'd seen him out of slacks and a button-down, and he couldn't help but think he looked—

Well. They didn't really know one another that well. He looked absolutely fine outside his usual clothes, no other details required.

A cheer went up at the bar, and both Phil and Clint twisted around to see a group of five young men cheering and crashing their beer glasses together. Phil momentarily wished he'd found a different sports bar.

"Ever wish you were a frat boy again?" Clint asked, and Phil shifted back to look at him.

"No," he answered.

Clint laughed. "You know, I gotta admit, this is the last place I figured I'd run into you on the weekend."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, figured you went to the philharmonic or read great literature or something, not all this."

Phil watched him gesture vaguely to the half-packed bar and tried not to feel a spike of rising embarrassment. Adjusting to new schools was always hard, but he'd hoped to make a slightly better impression. "I wanted to catch the game, but my cable's out."

"On game day? Ouch."

"Well, it gave me an excuse to escape." Clint raised his eyebrows. "From my literary overlords."

The bark of laughter that followed turned a few heads at the next table, and Phil didn't attempt to stand on the edges of his own smile. Clint waved at the strangers, too—after he recovered. "You're a good man, Coulson," he decided.

"That's a relief. I'd been concerned." Clint grinned, but then Phil watched him shift his weight from one foot to the other. He tucked his thumbs in his back pockets and his eyes drifted to the nearest TV, but he never actually budged. "Do you want to join me?"

"Oh." Clint blinked. "I, uh, don't wanna intrude or anything. I just thought I'd say hi, grab a burger, get out of your—"

"And cry into your beer when the Badgers win?" Phil suggested.

The hesitation immediately dropped off Clint's face. "You're joking."

"There are two things I don't joke about: children's literature, and football." Phil smiled. "Pull up a chair."

He swore for a moment that Clint didn't sit down so much as he did flop into the seat, but then the waitress arrived to ask if he wanted anything to drink, and seconds later, the game kicked off. They ordered mediocre nachos and decided to split a pitcher of beer, but mostly the goal was watching the game. Watching, and bickering during time-outs, because Clint apparently had Iowa-shaped blinders.

"You can be loyal and still admit they're losing," Phil pointed out after the second Wisconsin field goal.

"I'm going to start giving my kids gum before I send them to the library," Clint retorted, and Phil laughed as he rolled his eyes.

They exchanged snippets of conversations during the commercials. He learned random details about Clint he never would've guessed, otherwise: he'd been born in Iowa, he was regular devotee of all college sports, he loved to cook but hated cooking for one, "Which is why I decided bar burger during the game," he finished with a shrug. In return, Phil admitted that he'd only really started following sports because he couldn't play him, and that his parents—well, at least his dad—were more the philharmonic-and-literature types.

"You know," Clint said during halftime, sucking ketchup off his thumb in a way Phil almost found distracting, "I always wanted to start a school-wide pool for this kind of stuff. Just a bunch of us, together on the weekends—beer, snacks, and football. Nobody really seemed into it, and my place's pretty much a shoebox."

"It seems like everyone gets along well enough," Phil pointed out. "Maybe next year?"

"Maybe." Abruptly, Clint grinned. "Wanna be my copilot if I get it off the ground? Convince people you're not the guy who listens to Mozart all the time?"

"Mozart's boring."

"And that's totally not an answer."

"It's not." Phil watched Clint maintain his grin even as he took an enormous bite out of his burger. "I should warn you, I have what my sister calls a fondness for Excel."

Clint nearly snorted in his attempt to laugh and chew. "If your sister calls it a fondness, it's gotta be some sort of OCD disease."

"Fondness," Phil repeated with a smile, and he was fairly sure Clint purposely kicked him under the table.

The bar started to fill up during the last half of the game, filled with enough noise, sound, and edge-of-the-seat football play that caused Phil and Clint's conversation mostly ended. By the last few seconds, the other man was standing at the end of every play like he was in his own living room.

Phil tried not to laugh. He failed.

Afterwards, when the Hawkeyes were licking their wounds and Phil was at least mature enough not to gloat, they settled their tab and walked out into the crisp October cold together. Phil watched as Clint, perpetually sleeveless, shoved his hands in his pockets. "You'll get frostbite," he noted.

Clint grinned. "But you got free tickets to the gun show," he retorted, and Phil rolled his eyes. At least, until Clint elbowed him in the arm. "You wanna do the game thing again, find me in the staff directory. It's good to get out every once in a while. Avoid your overlords."

"Literary overlords," Phil corrected.

"Right, right." He thought he noticed the other man's grin falter for a half-second, but then Clint nudged him again. "Seriously."

Phil held his hands up in surrender. "I'll keep it in mind," he promised.

He watched Clint trot across the parking lot to his car, where he waved before disappearing into the driver's seat. For a moment, he wasn't entirely sure what to make of the accidental afternoon. It wasn't that Phil was necessarily bad at making friends, it was just that he sometimes thought people assumed him to be bland. Boring, maybe, was the better word.

But Clint hadn't.

Or, he reminded himself, Clint'd just wanted a game day buddy, boring or not.

Phil decided to give that pessimistic voice at least the rest of the day off, and headed home.

October 12 – Six Years Ago

This was not how Clint Barton wanted to get his evening started. Traditionally during the week of fall break, school operated on half-day schedule for Monday and Tuesday before giving everyone a five-day weekend starting on Wednesday. Kids came in for the mornings, and parents came in the afternoon for parent-teacher conferences.

Translation: two days of non-stop meetings and chaos.

He really should have picked a different time for this, but he'd been waiting a year for this to

happen, and he didn't want to wait another day.

Backtrack to last week when he'd cornered Phil in the library after everyone cleared out of the place once the staff meeting wrapped up. The librarian was kneeling to replace a few *Babysitter's Club* books to their rightful home, and Clint—not for the first time—tried not to stare too openly at the way Phil's dress shirt and slacks clung to the lines of his body. Clint gave his head a quick shake and focused on his mission. He assumed what his students knew as his "serious" pose: arms crossed over his chest, feet spread shoulder-width apart, and a focused expression on his face. Five years of teaching fifth graders had turned him into an intimidation machine, and apparently he'd gone too far down that road because when Phil stood and turned around, he took an involuntary step backward and raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "Can I help you with something, Clint?"

"How many times do I have to grope your thigh when I 'accidentally' drop my napkin while we're out for payday happy hour before you catch the hint that I think you're hot and I want to do something about it?"

Clint noted how the other man's eyes quickly flicked down to his biceps before coming back up to look him in the eye. "I just thought you were being clumsy."

"On the contrary, I have excellent hand-eye coordination."

"Is that so?"

Clint smirked. "Oh, I'm very talented. I'm considered an expert at juggling balls." He waggled his eyebrows at the last couple of words.

Phil tilted his head slightly to the right and crossed his arms over his chest. "Practice that a lot do you? With a number of...balls?"

Clint cringed. "Okay, that came out sluttier than I wanted it to. Look—I'm attracted to you. Pretty sure you're attracted to me. We're going out. Next week is fall break, let's go do something. You pick the time and place."

It was Phil's turn to grimace. "I have a conference I'm attending next week. I'm flying out first thing Wednesday morning. What about this weekend?"

Clint simultaneously felt joy that Phil had tentatively agreed and immediate pissyness for scheduling conflicts. "Can't this weekend—promised a college buddy I'd go visit him."

"We could wait till after fall break."

"No. That is absolutely unacceptable." He took a moment to scratch the nape of his neck. "What about Tuesday night? Celebrate conferences being over and kick off fall break with a nice, unfortunately-late dinner somewhere. I mean, if that's okay with you."

And that became the plan—finish up meeting with parents and head out for a late dinner. Clint made reservations for eight that evening at some Thai place Phil suggested. Everyone was supposed to clear out of the school by seven-thirty, and Clint found himself breaking eye contact with parents all afternoon and evening to check the clock above his classroom door.

Conferences went as well as they ever did. There was always a mixture: the super concerned parents of students who were doing just fine, the unconcerned parents of students who needed help, and those fantastic parents who didn't care enough to show up at all. Meeting moms and dads always explained so much about how and why his fifth graders behaved the way they did.

His last meeting of the day involved a parent whose toddler had to tag along. Right before they left, said toddler managed to spill his juice cup on Clint's white dress shirt and gray slacks. The mother apologized profusely, but Clint waved her off and bit his tongue. Why on earth she'd given the kid fruit punch to drink was beyond him, and he now had five minutes to get the pink stain out of his clothes. As soon as the family was out of sight, he dashed into the nearest bathroom, but to no avail. The patch of pink remained, and it looked like he'd tried to shower with his clothes on.

Admitting defeat, he trudged down the hallway to the library and poked his head in the door. Phil was talking to a set of parents and did a double take at him when he caught sight of Clint in the doorway. The parents' attention followed Phil's, and the wife immediately started digging in her purse proclaiming she had a Tide stick in there somewhere. Clint told her not to worry about it before turning to Phil. "Let me go home and change, and I'll meet you at the place as soon as I can?"

Phil nodded. "That's fine."

"Is there some staff party after this?" the husband asked. "God knows I'd need a drink after dealing with a bunch of parents."

Clint and Phil both gave a polite chuckle before the librarian answered, "Something like that."

Clint waved the trio goodbye and then sped out of the school and to his apartment as quickly as possible. He stripped out of his clothes on the way to his closet and managed to only trip twice in the process. Detouring to the bathroom in a moment of clarity, he thankfully brushed his teeth in his underwear since his haste caused him to get toothpaste down his chest. After spitting and rinsing, he ran his hand along his jaw and considered a second shave for the day, but didn't want to run any later than he already was.

He opened his closet and wanted to kick himself for his laziness at putting away clean clothes. Most of his slacks were in a pile on the ground, and he didn't want to iron anything. He grabbed a pair of decent jeans and pulled them on. Remembering how he'd caught Phil taking notice of his arms, Clint grabbed a black button-up that he knew ran a little tight across his shoulders and in the sleeves. Checking his hair once more, he dashed out of his place and tried his best not to get a speeding ticket on the way to the restaurant.

The Thai place in question was in an unfamiliar part of town. Clint was glad for this because it meant there was a lessened chance they'd run into parents or students from school, and he desperately wanted to keep this part of his private life private. The downside was he got lost on the way there, making him five minutes later than he'd hoped. When he walked in, he quickly spotted Phil giving him a little wave from a table. Clint gave him a nod and maneuvered his way around fellow diners to the table. The place was surprisingly busy for this late on a Tuesday.

"Sorry again for the hiccups," Clint apologized as he took his seat. "That was not how I wanted the evening to start."

Phil gave him a little smile. "It's fine. Wouldn't be a true first date without a few mishaps."

Clint nodded and picked up his menu. "What's good here?"

Phil shrugged. "I had the Pad Thai the first time I came here and haven't tried anything else since." He paused to shrug. "I'm boring like that."

Clint shook his head. "I've never considered you boring."

"You don't know me that well, then."

The waiter came by to take their order, and once he left, Phil regaled Clint with stories of dealing with the new technology teacher. In exchange, Clint told his date about being put to shame after getting in a debate with one of his students—an intelligent and occasionally mouthy girl named Kate—about the themes found in last week's reading selection.

When their food arrived, they fell into the horrible habit known to all teachers—inhaling their food. Too many lunches spent with barely twenty minutes to consume a meal while returning phone calls and making copies had ingrained the need to eat as quickly as manners would allow. They both shared a small, slightly embarrassed chuckle when they recognized the habit.

After their plates were cleared and Phil turned down splitting dessert with the excuse of "I'm trying to watch my figure," the librarian went into another series of stories about his years of teaching in one of the district's high schools over coffee. He paused in the middle of one tale and gave Clint a confused look. "Do I have something in my teeth?"

"Hmm?"

"You keep staring at my mouth. Is there something green stuck in there I need to take care of?"

"Oh, no," Clint said with a shake of his head. He hesitated a moment before leaning forward and tilting his head just so to show the device tucked away in his ear.

Phil moved closer to see, and Clint caught the surprise on the other man's face out of the corner of his eye. "You have a hearing aid?" he asked.

Clint settled back in his chair with a nod. "Two actually. I was an idiot when I was fourteen—no big surprise there—and my friends and I were messing around with some fireworks. One of them had a short fuse and I was at least smart enough to dump it before it blew my fingers off, but didn't get my ears covered in time. Been wearing hearing aids ever since.

"They help me hear everything around me, but they aren't always the best at picking up direction. So if I'm in a place where there's a lot of different conversations going on, or just a lot of noise in general, I'll also read the person's lips just to make sure I'm paying attention to the right words."

"And here I was hoping you were staring at my mouth because you wanted to kiss me."

"Who says I don't?" Clint asked. The waiter came by to drop off their check, and Clint's fingers were faster than Phil's. "You can pay next time."

On the way out, Clint made sure Phil was all ready to leave for his book conference with his former co-librarian from the high school the next morning. "I can drive you to the airport in the morning if you need it."

Phil smiled and shook his head. "Nadine's husband is picking me up and dropping us off, but thanks for the offer." The two men walked silently to Phil's car, which was closer. "But maybe I'll call when I get in Sunday night. I don't have to; I know it's probably not the most exciting thing ever to talk about..."

"No, it sounds great. Let me know if you see anything there I can use for my class," Clint reassured. He looked down at his shoes as his right toe kicked a little at the pavement while he tried to decide how to prolong the moment and how far he was willing to risk making a fool of himself. He settled on placing his left hand on the side of Phil's face. Clint waited for a reaction, and when the small surprise faded and he felt Phil lean ever so slightly into the touch, he edged

forward slowly brushed a quick kiss against the corner of Phil's mouth. "Thanks for tonight," he said softly. "Have a good trip."

"You too," Phil breathed before catching his error and shaking his head. "I mean, have a good break."

October 12 – Five Years Ago

Phil awoke on a Wednesday morning with a smile settled on his face. His house was unusually empty because Tony had drug Clint away after their mutual bachelor party the night before, claiming something about blushing brides not being allowed to see each other before the big day. Or the small courthouse ceremony. Whichever. Phil looked forward to hearing whatever stories would certainly come about from Clint being forced to crash at Stark's place overnight.

He remained in bed for a moment and listened to the silence of his house. The stillness and quiet was his norm for so many years, an emptiness he'd come to accept as his life. Work was full of laughter and the joy of sharing books with his students, but home was still and stagnant.

And then he'd met Clint.

Clint, who'd officially moved in at the end of last school year even though they'd spent most nights together since Christmas break. Clint, who moaned and groaned when Phil elbowed and shoved at him to turn off the vibrating cell phone alarm under his pillow every weekday morning. Clint, who made coffee and was physically incapable of speaking in full sentences until he'd consumed at least two mugs worth and had a shower. Clint, who left half-graded worksheets strewn everywhere and could never find his keys. Clint, who was constant noise and mess and fidgeting.

Clint, who brought Phil coffee whenever he picked his kids up from the library. Clint, who made amazing dinners and never turned down the opportunity to swat at Phil's ass with the wooden spoon before he used it for its proper purpose. Clint, whose fingers seemed bound and determined to mark, measure, and memorize every bit of Phil's body.

Clint, who by the time the day was over, would be Phil's husband.

A chuckle escaped Phil's throat and broke the silence in the empty house. Husband. He shook his head, and not for the first time, at the thought.

Phil'd brought up their upcoming first anniversary six weeks ago and asked how Clint thought they should spend it. The other man shrugged and answered, "What about with matching wedding bands?" It was not the proposal Phil was expecting, mostly because he wasn't prepared for one at all. But it felt right, so he'd agreed and would forever cherish the memory of the grin that plastered itself onto Clint's face.

They'd told Phil's family, who would be driving in for the ceremony, and a few teachers at work. Most of the staff knew they were a couple, but they kept themselves strictly professional at work. Well, unless the kids were all gone and only their friends were around.

There would be a total of nine of them going to the courthouse today: Clint and Phil, Phil's parents, his two sisters, and Bruce, Tony, and Natasha. The pair had batted around the idea of writing their own vows for the occasion, but the thought was quickly scrapped. Clint claimed he was better with actions than words, and Phil was a little scared his emotions would get the better of him, and his sisters' list of things they'd never let him live down was long enough already.

He was about to roll out of bed and get his morning routine started when his cell phone rang. Phil

wasn't sure if it was Clint or Tony who had changed Clint's ID to read as "Hot Pants" last night, but he was pretty sure it was one of the two. "Good morning," Phil greeted.

"Hey," Clint answered, a smile evident in his voice. "You're going to show up today, right?"

"Well, there is a *Dog Whisperer* marathon on this afternoon."

"Do I need to grow a goatee? Will that change your mind?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Phil answered, causing Clint to laugh.

Through the phone, Phil heard Tony yelling something in the background. "Your mom," Clint answered.

Tony must've closed in on Clint, because his voice and words were suddenly understandable.

"Well, seeing as how she's been dead for twenty-some years, your phone bill's going to be a bitch. Is that your lover boy?"

"Shut up, Stark," Clint shot back. "We're just talking. We can't see each other."

"Doesn't matter, give me that. Ow! Purple nurple? Seriously, Barton? Coulson, does he do that to you? Is that the kind of stuff you like? Should I have bought nipple clamps for your wedding present?"

"Please make him stop talking," Phil moaned.

"Go away, Stark," Clint chided. "I'm going to make sure you follow all these idiotic traditions when it's your turn to get married."

Tony scoffed at the notion. "Please, the day I get married is the day Hell freezes over. Now give me that. Hey, Specs." Phil rolled his eyes not only at Tony commandeering Clint's phone but at the nickname the technology teacher had given him the first time he'd seen Phil wearing his glasses to work. "Don't worry about your Pumpkin Patch, here. I'll make sure he gets to the courthouse on time."

"When do *you* ever run on time, Stark?"

"Fair point. Bruce will make sure both of us get to the courthouse on time. And everything is set up and ready to go for wedding reception lunch afterwards. Food should be here at one. I made sure all my sex swings are put away...unless your family's into that kind of thing—"

"Tony!"

"Okay, okay, calm down. Jesus, Coulson. Now, we've got the old and new covered with you and Barton, respectively. You're borrowing my house later. Just make sure you take care of the blue. And don't forget that lacy garter thing to put on your thigh."

"Please put Clint back on the phone," Phil ground out.

"Nope," Tony replied before hanging up.

Phil sighed and tried to work his way back into his previous good mood. His text alert sounding a moment later with the message of "Love you, too" from Hot Pants helped.

After a breakfast of cereal and coffee and a quick run to try and settle some excited energy (which didn't work), Phil showered. Even before his little chat with Tony, he knew he was going to wear

his best suit and navy blue tie with white stripes running down diagonally. Clint had gotten him the tie last Christmas. Once dressed, he checked himself over in the mirror and made sure his shoes were scuff-free. Running right on schedule, he had just enough time to throw his and Clint's luggage into the trunk and head off for the county courthouse.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot. And soon as he climbed out of the sedan, he spotted his parents coming towards him, smiles on their faces. "Hi, guys," he greeted.

His mother, a retired school superintendent for the next county over, wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a hug. "We're so happy for you," she whispered in his ear.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Judy, quit hogging the boy," his father, a lit professor who was still terrorizing students at the university twenty miles away, said. His mother let him go, and Phil's father stepped in for a hug. He pulled away and gave his son a nod, the smile under the silver mustache speaking his love and pride.

"Where are the girls?" Phil asked.

"Christine picked up Suzy an hour ago," Judy answered. "They should be here any second."

"We're right here," a voice called from behind them. "*Someone* got pulled over for speeding."

Phil bit his lip to prevent a smile from crossing his face as his younger sister glared the oldest of the three Coulson children for ratting her out.

"Christine Marie, how many speeding tickets does that make?" their father asked.

The woman with shoulder-length brown hair rolled her eyes. "Dad, you haven't paid for my car insurance in almost twenty years. Don't worry about it." She then looked over at her older brother gave him a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, Chrissy." He reached over to accept a hug from his other sister. "Thanks, both of you, for taking a day off of work for this."

"It's your wedding day, dumbass, of course we're taking the day off work."

"Suzy—language," their mother chastised.

"Mom, I just turned forty. I'm pretty sure I'm allowed to swear, and you are the only one who doesn't call me Susan." She turned an evil expression on Phil. "Speaking of turning forty—any chance my soon-to-be brother-in-law is going to help devise a sadistic party when you hit the big four-oh in a year-and-a-half?"

"Seeing as how he turns thirty two weeks after my fortieth? No. He knows better than to incite my revenge."

Susan pouted her bottom lip slightly at the news. "I still have some time to convince Hunkalicious otherwise."

"Hunkalicious?" Phil questioned.

His younger sister rolled her eyes. "Please, like you're marrying him for some other reason than his spectacular ass."

Phil sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand. "Please swear to me, both of you, that you will not grope Clint."

"We will not grope Clint," Christine promised with one hand raised.

"Anymore," Susan finished.

"Enough, girls," their father chided. "Besides, we all know the real reason Phil is marrying Clint—the man can cook. Same reason I married your mother."

"And here I thought the thing Clint and I had in common was our great asses," Phil's mother countered.

"Oh, so you can swear but I can't?" Susan demanded over Phil and Christine's groans.

"Hush, all of you," Judy ordered with a wave of her hand. "Let's get this show on the road."

As they maneuvered through the parking lot, Phil went over the plans. They'd wait in line for their turn in front of the justice, then all go back to Tony's oversized house for a lunch before Phil and Clint took off for the cabin they'd rented for the remainder of fall break. "I know it's not much," Phil said with a shrug.

His father patted him on the back. "It's perfect, son. And frankly I don't give a damn what the two of you do. I'm just happy I don't have to pay for this one." Phil could practically feel his sisters roll their eyes behind him.

As they entered the courthouse, a flash of red to his left caught Phil's eye. Natasha, dressed in a knee-length black shift dress and red heels, stood off the side and gave him a tentative half-smile when he looked over. He waved at her and she approached, heels clicking on the tiled floor.

"This is Natasha Romanoff, our new P.E. teacher. I'm her mentor since it's her first year teaching." The woman nodded hello. "Natasha, these are my parents, Gregory and Judy. And my sisters, Susan and Christine." Everyone shook hands and whatever polite little story Phil was about to tell next vanished from his tongue at the sound of the courthouse doors being thrown open.

In his mind, Phil recognized Bruce and Tony had entered the building, unsurprisingly bickering about something, but all Phil could see was Clint. The man wore a black suit with barely-there pinstripes, and it was tailored perfectly to his body—that had been Phil's single demand for this whole thing.

The other man nodded a quick hello to Phil's family before muttering, "Excuse me for a second," and crushing his mouth against Phil's.

When they pulled apart, they were both a little breathless. "Better?" Phil asked as he ran fingers down Clint's silk, purple tie.

"Yeah," Clint sighed before turning back towards Phil's family. The younger man wrapped Judy up in a bear hug that she quickly returned. "Hi, Mama Coulson."

When he let her go, Judy reached up and gently patted Clint's cheek. "I'm sure your parents wish they could be here. And I know they would be so very proud of you."

"Thanks," he replied quietly with a bashful duck of his head. He turned to Phil's father and accepted a hearty handshake from the older gentlemen.

"Always happy to add another kid to the family, Clint."

"Thank you, sir."

Phil smiled at the sight. Clint had been uneasy around the family at first. The idea of relatives was something the man had gone years without since he'd lost his parents at a young age and was estranged from his brother, Barney. But something happened back in June when the two of them had spent the week at Gregory and Judy's as Phil's mother had gone through another of her *Let's redecorate the entire house* phases that swung around like clockwork every five years. Since then, Clint had been more relaxed and comfortable around his soon-to-be in-laws.

After Phil's dad released Clint's hand, the man then turned to the sisters and embraced them both in a group hug. Susan caught Phil's eyes and made a show of hovering her hand over Clint's ass before settling it on his back.

"Is this hug time? I wasn't aware this was part of the schedule. Do I get to join in?"

Phil rolled his eyes. "Family, this is Tony Stark, our technology teacher. The polite man behind him is Doctor Banner, he teaches kindergarten. Gentlemen, meet my parents and my sisters."

"Ah, a fellow PhD?" Gregory asked Bruce.

"Yes, sir, in physics. You?"

"Shakespeare."

"I have two master's degrees, in case anyone is interested. Mechanical engineering and business—for the record."

"No one cares, Tony," Natasha said.

Clint laughed and leaned over to kiss the redheaded woman's cheek as a greeting. Even though she was Phil's mentee, Clint had basically taken her in as a little sister in the two months she'd been at the school.

Another round of handshakes and hellos passed by before Clint eagerly rubbed his hands together. "Alright, folks, let's do this."

The group waited as patiently as possible for their turn. Clint asked no less than four times if Bruce had the rings, and every time Bruce quietly reassured him they were in his pocket and took them out to show Clint. Phil tried to hide his snicker at the fact that Bruce was using the same tone of voice he used for his six-year-olds.

Finally, it was their turn. Phil wanted to remember more from the brief ceremony. It only lasted ten minutes; he should've remembered all of it, but not everything clung in his memory. The judge did—a petite, older Asian woman who only came up to the men's shoulders. Clint's goof of grabbing for Phil's right hand when it came time for rings and the embarrassed smile he gave before sliding the white gold band over Phil's knuckles stuck out. And their first kiss as a married couple. The rest was a haze, a blur of the most important words he'd ever say or hear. The two of them signed the license, his sisters signed as witnesses, and it was done.

Phil expected to feel different, but other than the weight around his left ring finger, not much else had changed. It probably just needed to sink in.

The gang made their way back out to the parking lot, and Tony gave his address to Phil's family to

put in their GPS. He then twirled and pointed a finger at the newlyweds. "Food is arriving in half an hour. I'm eating as soon as it gets there, regardless of whether or not you two sneak off for a quickie."

"Forgive him," Bruce muttered to Phil's family before physically dragging Tony off. Natasha rolled her eyes and moved to her own car.

Once they all reconvened at Tony's ridiculously-sized home, they barely had enough time to make it in the door before the food arrived. Tony, Bruce and Natasha set up the spread furnished by the Thai place where the guys had their first date exactly one year ago. Phil rolled his eyes when he caught sight of the cake. The topper was two men in tuxes and each had one their arm around the other, until you looked at the back and realized that each man was actually groping the other's backside. "I thought it was fitting," Susan whispered in his ear as she passed him.

They ate sitting around the spacious dining room table. Tony offered champagne to his guests, even though he and Bruce stuck to water. By the time the meal wrapped up, Gregory stood and delicately tapped a knife against his crystal champagne flute. "I suppose it's tradition for the father to make some toast, or at least that's what I was tricked into doing with the girls." He paused a moment to smile at Clint and Phil. "Clint, I have never seen my son as happy as he is around you. Judy and I hoped Phillip would find someone for himself, and you, son, are worth the wait. Now, as a husband to one of my children, there are some rules you must follow. One—you must attend a minimum of two holiday dinners per year at our home. Two—you must smoke a minimum of three cigars with me and be regaled with tales from my youth per annum."

"'Per annum', Dad? Really?"

"Hush, Christine, I'm toasting. Three—you call your in-laws once a week to check in. Or we will hunt you down."

"Yes, sir," Clint responded with a smile.

Gregory raised his glass. "To Phil and Clint." The others echoed their names and clinks of flutes tapping each other rang out.

After cake and coffee, the guests began to disperse. Phil's parents hugged both of the men, and the sisters kissed each of their cheeks. Phil turned and offered to help Tony, Bruce, and Natasha clean up, but Bruce waved them off. "You guys get out of here."

"You mind if we change first?" Clint asked. "I really don't want to spend three hours in the car wearing a suit."

"Fine, but only single people are allowed to have sex in this house, so don't get any ideas," Tony answered.

After swapping out their suits for jeans and long-sleeved shirts, the couple came back into the kitchen to give their goodbyes to their friends.

"Before you go," Natasha said, pulling out a gift bag, "I know you said you didn't want presents, but traditions should be observed."

"Thank you," Phil said as Clint eagerly pulled out the tissue paper. The first thing he pulled out was a large padlock painted red with an ornate key stuck in the lock. He passed the heavy object to Phil, who noted the date and their initials etched on its face.

"It's a love lock. You're supposed to attach it to the railing of a bridge, and then throw the key in

the water."

Phil smiled at the thought of what such an action meant. "Thank you, Natasha."

She nodded at him before pointing at the bag. "The other thing is also tradition."

Clint whistled as he pulled a bottle of vodka from the bag. "I can't read the label."

"Ugh," Tony groaned. "I remember that stuff. Barely. That is death in liquid form."

Natasha nodded. "Go easy on it."

"Thank you, Tasha," Clint said as he pulled her in for a hug.

"Be good to him," Natasha told him while his arms were still wrapped around him.

"Why does everyone think they need to tell me that?" Clint whined.

"I don't care about other people. I just need him alive until the end of the school year so he can sign off on my paperwork. So try not to kill him with sex until June."

Clint laughed. "Deal."

Phil pushed his husband, his brain still humming at the word, out of the way so he could give the petite redhead a hug. "Thank you."

"Thank you for including me in this."

Phil pulled away with a smile. He turned and extended his hand to Stark. "Thank you for letting us use your house."

Tony's mouth crooked up in a soft smile. "My pleasure. Congratulations, guys," he said as he let go of Phil's hand to shake Clint's.

It was Bruce's turn to shake hands with the men. "Cherish this," he said with a smile that didn't quite cover sadness in his eyes. "You never know how long you get to have it."

"Thanks, man," Clint returned, patting the other man's arm.

Phil smiled at the kindergarten teacher. "Yes, thank you, Bruce. And thanks for being on ring duty today."

"My pleasure. My kids are going to be so jealous when I tell them on Monday that it was my turn to be a ring bearer."

The men laughed as they headed out to Phil's car. Once Clint was settled behind the steering wheel he turned to Phil. "Are we ready? Do we have everything we need?"

"I'm looking at everything I need."

Clint rolled his eyes. "God, Phil, don't tell me that since we're married now you're just going to be one giant sap."

"I'll try and refrain myself," Phil promised as he leaned in for a kiss. It was a nice kiss, and would've been even better if Tony hadn't have started yelling at them from the front door.

"Quit making out in my driveway! Get out of here you two."

October 12 – Four Years Ago

It was wrong to look at the clock when one of your students was crying his eyes out.

Clint told himself this over and over again, a mantra in the back of his head that sounded like a drum beat, but it was four p.m. Not only was it four p.m., but it was four p.m. on October 12, and, well, he had plans, okay?

You only got one anniversary a year. Actually, most people got two, 'cause they could fall back on the dating anniversary if they screwed up the wedding one, and he was the idiot who'd stacked the two dates.

And Chris Petersen was sobbing.

Chris, if Clint had to make estimations, was the most sensitive kid he'd ever had. He was the boy who didn't want to step on bugs or people's toes, who worked harder than anybody in the school not to hurt people's feelings, and who wrote a lot of poetry in the back of his notebooks. He also had a deadbeat dad, a career mom who barely had time for him, and a dead dog.

The dead dog was new. The dead dog'd apparently, from what Clint'd figured out through the crying, happened that morning, but rather than keep her kid home after she'd put his dog down, Mrs. Petersen'd dropped Chris and a note off at the office and kept right on her way.

The ridiculously ineffective school counselor hadn't been able to calm him down. Neither had Carol, the new and completely terrifying special education teacher who'd found Chris crying in the hallway and tried to talk him off the ledge of dog-related misery. By the time lunch came and went, he'd started to pull himself together.

And then Clint'd told him to hang in there, and— Well.

"He was my friend," Chris snuffled, dragging his sleeve across his face, and Clint pulled himself back into the moment enough to nod appropriately. Chris trained big, wet eyes on him. "My mom's always so busy and my dad decided to go find himself because my mom said that's what selfish jerks do—"

"Uh."

"—and now, Munchkin's gone, too!"

The sobbing started fresh, and Clint reached over to his desk to snag a box of tissues for the kid. When he glanced up, he caught Phil hovering in the hallway, jacket on, bag ready, and a concerned look on his face. He raised his eyebrows, and Clint shook his head.

Come get me when you're done, Phil mouthed, and Clint tried to force a smile as he wandered off.

Once Chris settled back down to sniffles, Clint slid the tiny chair he was sitting on a couple inches closer and leaned his elbows on his legs. "You in the place where I can ask you something?" he questioned. Chris raised his head and, very carefully, nodded. His face was red from crying and his eyes looked swollen. "You ever seen *All Dogs Go to Heaven*?"

Chris frowned. "Is that a movie?"

"Is that a— Way to make a guy feel old, kid. Yeah, it's a movie. It's a *great* movie." Chris kept

staring him down, so he sighed and continued. "It's about a dog who isn't exactly a great person—"

"But he's a dog."

"Right, a dog, that's what I mean. But you know what makes him a better per—dog by the end? Knowing that he helped out a kid who was lonely and needed a friend." Clint reached forward and, very lightly, nudged Chris's knee with two fingers. "I bet that's all that mattered to Munchkin, knowing that he got to be there for you."

Chris sniffled and dragged his hand across his face again. "But the dog died at the end?"

"Yeah. That's what happens sometimes. And you said Munchkin was pretty sick, right?" Clint waited for the boy to nod. "Sometimes, the hardest part about loving somebody else, dog or person, is knowing when they need you to be brave, and then letting them go."

An hour later, after Chris's mother finally picked him up from the after-school program and Clint felt comfortable leaving the poor kid with his misery, he slumped against the car's passenger seat and resisted the urge to beat his head against the window.

"You do realize that *All Dogs Go to Heaven* was a terrible movie to illustrate your point?" Phil asked without glancing away from the road.

"Realized it as soon as I remembered the dog was kind of an asshole." Clint sighed and closed his eyes. "What the hell is wrong with that woman, anyway?"

"Who?"

"Chris's mom. It's bad enough that she doesn't return phone calls and sends me back form e-mails thanking me for my 'concern about his academic progress—'" And yeah, Clint pulled out the finger quotes. "—but this takes the cake. I mean, what kind of woman leaves her kid sitting in the vet's waiting room while they off his dog and then brings him to school?"

"Losing pets is a part of life," Phil noted.

Clint twisted in his seat to stare at his husband. "You did not just play devil's advocate about this."

He watched Phil cringe. "I did," he admitted, "and now, I feel slightly dirty." He shook his head as they pulled off the main road and into the strip of restaurants and shops that housed their favorite Thai place. "Can I use the 'it's better than her keeping him out for a week of healing' defense?"

"No."

"I'll make it up to you when we get home tonight?"

And thank god for Phil Coulson's wicked smile and the things it did to Clint's belly. "That, I'll agree to," he decided, and Phil spent a couple minutes too long at a parking lot stop sign to grin at him.

The hostess who recognized them on sight ushered them into a back booth, and Clint had to admit that, work drama or no, it wasn't a bad way to spend their first wedding anniversary. He sometimes still got a little blown away by that, actually. It'd been pretty monumental that Phil agreed to date him at all, let alone marry him and stay married to him. Carol'd voiced her surprise about it at least four times in the last six weeks.

They went over their days while they waited for their dinners and complained together that fall

break was a week later this year and *not* on their actual anniversary. Clint recounted the text message conversation he'd had with Phil's mom over lunch—whoever'd taught Judy to text was simultaneously evil and a genius—and maybe even slipped in a little footsie until Phil rolled his eyes about it.

Just a normal day, mostly, but Clint'd never thought he'd have a stable, warm, together life like this. At least, not until Phil.

He thought about mentioning that but then the food came, and it smelled too good to ignore.

They were about halfway through their meal when something occurred to Clint.

"You ever had a dog?"

Phil paused in the middle of reaching for his glass. "I didn't know the traditional anniversary gift for the first year was an obsession with pets."

Clint rolled his eyes. "Sorry. After the day I had, I forgot to order the scattered rose petals or whatever."

"Would they have been in the shape of a dog?"

Clint raised his hands. "Fine, sorry," he promised. He returned to his plate and tried not to feel guilty, but it was a little hard. Phil was right, but then again, rough days with the kids weren't rough days at a bank or a supermarket. It sat with him in weird ways sometimes.

After a couple seconds, though, Phil set his glass back down. "We had a bulldog," he said, his voice softer than just a minute ago. "I don't remember which one of us conned my parents into getting her, but she was a rescue. Daisy. I was probably eight or nine when we got her, and we had to put her to sleep when I was in high school."

Clint watched him run his finger along the side of his glass for a second. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago," Phil said, shrugging as he picked up his fork. "She's one of the things I remember best from being a kid, though, you know? I think it took us putting her down for me to understand why people consider pets a part of the family."

"I always wanted a dog. Barney and me must've driven my dad crazy about it, but he never budged."

"You wouldn't know what to do with a dog." The corner of Phil's mouth twitched slightly in a smirk. "You'd feed it scraps until you had to roll it out to the yard."

"Dogs love me."

"They love the smell of you, maybe."

"You are, like, this close to not getting your anniversary sex," Clint warned, and Phil laughed when he looked up to see just how closely together Clint was holding his thumb and forefinger. He looked so good laughing, his crow's feet bunched together and his face warm, that Clint couldn't help but reach over and grip his spare hand for a second. At least, it was supposed to be a second.

It ended up being a whole lot longer.

Chris Petersen's dog didn't come up again for the rest of dinner, and neither did Daisy Coulson.

They finished their huge plates of food, plus the chocolate dessert they *didn't* order—"From a friend of yours," the waitress explained—and then, a cup of coffee each. When they asked for the check, the waitress informed them that it'd been paid by someone who, quote, "wanted them too fat and full to do anything that decent people would be horrified by."

Phil and Clint spent all of a half-second look at one another before they decided, "Tony."

Fat and full as they were, it didn't keep them from lazily kissing against the side of their car in the parking lot, coffee-tinged brushes of lips that mostly just promised what was going to come next. Clint felt cold when he finally released Phil so he could go around and actually drive them home, but it wasn't a bad kind of shiver.

Halfway through the drive, a thought occurred to him, and he dug out his phone. A couple Google searches later, and he was so caught up in what he was doing that he didn't even realize they'd made it back to the house.

He must've been grinning, too, because as soon as they were out of the car, Phil was nudging Clint's shoulder with his own. "What are you so wrapped up in?" he asked.

"Nothing," Clint retorted, and closed out his phone's web-browser before Phil could see that he was browsing the results for *bulldog puppies*.

October 12 – Three Years Ago

Clint knew it was only a matter of time before he had an anniversary turn into a disaster; he'd just hoped he'd get more time in before it showed up. But no, their second anniversary went completely off the rails.

This one landed on a Friday. It also happened to be the Friday before the shortened week of conferences followed by fall break. The kids (and the staff, too) could smell freedom in the air, and when you combined that with the normal high energy of a Friday, chaos was bound to ensue.

To make matters worse, as Clint was in the process of picking his kids up from lunch and taking a bathroom break, the batteries in each of his hearing aids died within minutes of each other. He brushed it off, knowing he had back-ups in his desk drawer. He got his kids back in the room long enough for them to grab their things for math and have them switch places with Jessica Jones's students. As her kids got settled into their places, Clint pulled open the middle drawer of his desk and began rooting around for the backup batteries, but he only found an empty Duracell package.

Mentally swearing, he instructed his students to get started with the journal prompt he had on the board. Judging from their expressions, he guessed he was talking a little louder than normal, but whatever. Pulling up his email, he fired off a quick message to Phil. Even though the other man would be outside for recess duty, Clint had keys to the library and could search Phil's office if need be. The return email appeared quickly in his inbox.

No, I don't have any spare batteries in my office. You used the last two the previous time this happened and swore you'd replace them before this became a problem again.

Clint felt a growl rise up in his throat, but swallowed it. Today was not the day to pick a fight with his husband. Tomorrow? Sure. But not today.

He sat back in his chair and debated about what to do. Half of the fifth graders had already been through his lesson on foreshadowing this morning. He could give the afternoon groups a Drop Everything And Read day, and then give them the foreshadowing lesson next week. But that

would be a crunch since the school would be operating on half-days. Clint wouldn't have time to go through everything at the pace he wanted to for a week and a half.

Making the best of what he had, he went ahead and followed through on his original lesson plan. The only modification he made was to have students take turns writing notes on the board for him, and the fact that he taught the whole time while standing on top of his desk.

He saw a flash of blonde hair pass the window next to his classroom door before Carol backpedaled to openly stare at him. She poked her head in and mouthed *What the hell are you doing?*

Clint ignored her. The sight of him teaching from atop his desk wasn't uncommon; the footprints covering each month of his desk calendar was proof enough for that. But it was usually a brief event—an attempt to make sure everyone was paying attention, driving a point home, singing whatever song or doing a little dance to help his kids remember something important. He never spent the whole afternoon up on his perch. But the upside to this position was his students had to all look up at him, making it easier to read their lips.

Not one to be ignored, Carol wove her way between the desks and came to stand in front of him. She raised her eyebrows in a silent request for more information. Clint rubbed the side of his face with his index finger, which pointed to his ear. Carol learned of his disability the second week they were teaching together when she covered Clint's class while he was called down to the office by Fury for impromptu translation services with a deaf father.

Carol gave him a look of concern and mouthed, "Need help?" Clint shook his head and she gave him a look of uncertainty before shrugging and pulling a few kids to work in her closet of a classroom.

He survived the rest of the day. After walking the kids down to the bus, he printed off the recipes he needed for tonight's dinner. Their customary Thai place was undergoing renovations (the manager sounded honestly sad when he told Clint he couldn't make their annual reservation), so Clint had decided to make his own version Pad Thai at home, as well as a batch of Phil's favorite cookies. He'd already bought ingredients, but having a backup set of recipes handy was probably a good idea.

Normally, Phil stopped off in his room once bus duty was over, but he still hadn't arrived. Clint grabbed his things and was in the process of locking up his room when Steve, the new art teacher, passed him in the hall.

"Is Mister Coulson still in the library?"

"Steve, the kids are gone and it's the weekend. You can call him Phil, even if he is your mentor. And, yeah, I think so, but we're getting ready to head out."

"Big plans?"

Clint didn't catch the fact that Tony was also in the hall until Steve made a face and looked in the technology teacher's direction. Stark was halfway through whatever wittiness he'd just come up with by the time Clint start reading his lips.

"—among other things that your virgin ears do not need to hear about."

Clint rolled his eyes. "Have a good weekend, Tony." He left the two men in the hallway and passed Pepper in the library as she made her way out of Phil's office. The new guidance counselor gave

him a smile.

Clint leaned against the door to Phil's office while his husband filled out purchase order forms. "Jealous of Carol being my work wife, so you're trying to pick up one for yourself?"

"What?" Phil asked as he looked up.

Clint noticed for the first time the slightly paler tone to his skin and hint of glassiness in Phil's eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Did you find batteries?"

"No, but I made it through the day. And you're not fine. You're getting sick."

"I haven't been sick in twelve years. And I'm certainly not going to be sick today."

"Yeah, whatever. Let's go home." Clint put Phil's messenger bag on his unoccupied shoulder and walked Phil out of the library. The pair stopped off at the office to sign out, Clint keeping a hand on Phil's back the whole way out to the car.

The drive home was silent and Clint tried not to become worried at how Phil kept his eyes closed and head against the car window for the ten minute trip. There was a flu bug going around the school, which was not an uncommon event, but teachers (with the exception of Tony who legitimately used every one of his sick days in the few years he'd been teaching) rarely gave in to germs.

Once they were in the front door, they were greeted with a foul smell. Phil slowly moved to hunt it down, but Clint shoved him in the direction of their bedroom. "Go get some rest, I'll take care of it and wake you up for dinner."

Phil turned and signed "New food" in Clint's direction before being shoved once more towards their bed.

It didn't take long for Clint to find whatever pile of bodily fluids their bulldog had left for them. "Bird, you're killing me," Clint sighed.

Upon hearing her name, Birdie slowly approached him with a pathetic expression on her face. Clint bent over and scooped up the not-quite one-year-old dog, holding her to his chest. "Aww, Pup, I still love you even though you're trying to ruin your other dad's favorite rug." He placed a kiss between the dog's eyes before wrenching his head back. "And Phil says I have horrible breath sometimes. Geez, dog."

He carried the dog to the back door and let her out into the fenced yard before gathering cleaning supplies. Once the mess was taken care of, he let the dog back in. Clint emptied her food bowl and silently cursed at the fact that they'd have to probably end up buying some ridiculously priced organic crap since Birdie was too big for puppy food now and nothing they'd tried so far seemed to settle with her stomach. He snuck her a cupful of leftover puppy food and was grateful Phil was in bed and wouldn't catch him and send him off to Petco immediately to find another new replacement for the dog's diet.

Clint stood in the kitchen and weighed his options. He could either carry on with the night's agenda and cook Pad Thai or he could text his mother-in-law and find out how to treat a sick Phil. His husband would probably get mad at having to scrap their plans, but Clint did it anyway. After firing off a text to Judy, Clint at least gathered the necessary supplies to bake the mint chocolate chip cookies that Phil loved dearly. His back pocket buzzed as he measured ingredients, and Clint

dusted flour off onto his jeans before reading the incoming text from Mama Coulson.

I'll email you my secret recipe for homemade chicken noodle soup. Don't tell the girls I gave it to you. ;) Tell Phil I hope he feels better soon. Call me if he gets too whiney. Love you. And sorry you got some kinks thrown in your kinky anniversary plans.

Clint laughed aloud at the text. He wasn't sure which grandchild taught Judy how to use emoticons, but they probably regretted it. He also made a mental note not to show Phil the text until he was feeling better; he'd probably die of mortification at the last sentence.

Once the batter was ready to go and had sat in the refrigerator for an hour, Clint put the first batch of cookies in the oven. He set the timer and wandered back towards the bedroom in order to check on Phil and finally change the batteries in his aids since he was sure he had back-ups on top of the dresser. Well, mostly sure.

As soon as he eased the door open, his eyes fell on an empty bed. "Phil?" he called out. Movement to his left drew him to the bathroom where Phil was kneeling in front of the toilet and retching up the leftover casserole he'd had for lunch. Clint wet a washcloth and draped it over the back of Phil's neck before rubbing a hand up and down the man's spine.

Once Phil's stomach was empty, he flushed the toilet and rocked backwards into a sitting position with a groan. He took the cloth from his neck and used it to wipe his face off while Clint filled a little paper cup with water. Phil traded him the washcloth for the cup, swished the water in his mouth, and spat it into the toilet. Clint rewet the washcloth with a new round of cold water before kneeling beside his husband and gently wiping down his face. He leaned forward to place a kiss on Phil's forehead and tried not to grimace at the heat he felt radiating from the man.

Phil weakly shoved him away. "You don't need to get sick, too."

Clint rolled his eyes. "I work in the same petri dish you do. Stop fussing." He stood and stretched a hand down to Phil, who took it and winced slightly at being pulled up from the ground so fast. "Sorry," Clint muttered. "Let's get you back into bed."

After Phil got settled, Clint removed the bag from the plastic trash can in the bathroom and knotted it up. He then took the trash can and placed it on the floor near Phil. He refrained from releasing a happy sigh at the sight of an unopened Duracell package on top of the dresser and quickly removed his aids to swap out the dead batteries for fresh ones. He'd barely put his hearing aids back in and turned them on before noise from everywhere overwhelmed him at once: the smoke detector blaring, Birdie howling, and Phil moaning, "Make it stop".

Clint threw him another apology as he darted into the kitchen. He snapped a "Birdie, hush" before fanning at the detector long enough to silence it. Turning off the oven, he reached in to pull out the sheet of blackened cookies and didn't realize he'd forgotten to grab a hot pad until his fingers jerked backwards in pain. Giving in to the litany of swears and curses that came to mind, he ran his fingertips under cool water until the throbbing decreased slightly.

Once the mess in the kitchen was taken care of, and the remainder of the cookie batter put back into the fridge to be dealt with tomorrow, Clint moved back to the bedroom. He changed out of his work jeans (one of a few pairs that didn't have holes or ratty cuffs) and polo shirt and into a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt emblazoned with the elementary school's name. The shirt in question had been given to him his first year of teaching and after eight years was worn and comfortable against his skin.

He then gently sank down onto the mattress and curled up on his side to face Phil. His husband's

eyes opened halfway and he tried to give him a smile, but it came across as a barely-there tug at the corners of his mouth. "Sorry," Phil apologized.

"For what?"

"Ruining this."

"You'll just have to spend all of fall break being my sex slave in order to make up for it."

"I thought that was already your plan."

Clint laughed and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Getting you better is my plan right now."

"Who's the sap this year?"

"I thought I should have a turn every now and then."

The two stayed quiet for a second a moment until Phil told him about why Pepper had stopped by his office that afternoon. "Guess Tony just waltzed right into her office—"

"No one is surprised by that."

"—and told her to wear a cocktail dress and killer heels."

"He just assumed she'd go with him to this wedding? Didn't even bother putting a question mark in there somewhere?" Clint asked.

"It's Tony."

"Fair point. Hey, he's not trying to move in on our anniversary, is he? I'm going to have to have a talk with him about that. Wait, she didn't actually agree did she? She seems smarter than that."

Phil attempted a single-shoulder shrug. "I think she sees him as some sort of social experiment. Or the mother of all head cases to help straighten out."

Clint snorted and shook his head before his stomach growled.

"You should go take care of that," Phil suggested. "Just don't let me smell whatever you eat."

"Fine," Clint said before reaching over Phil to grab one of the books off his nightstand.

"Don't even think about it," Phil warned, his eyes remaining closed the entire time.

"Aww, Phil, c'mon. You're not going to read it tonight."

"I know, and you'll stay up late to read the entire thing in one sitting. And then you'll be bouncing around all weekend because you can't keep spoilers to yourself. No."

Clint sighed. "Can't read a book. Burned my fingers. Can't eat Pad Thai."

"You can still eat that."

"Not without you," Clint replied before continuing his whining. "Can't have sex. Again, not without you. Can't find stupid dog food that the snobby pup can eat." He paused to give a dramatic sigh. "Did I mention the no sex?"

"I'm going to ignore you and go back to sleep now."

"Love you, too."

Eventually October 12 – Two Years Ago

The whole thing started on September 28 with the post-its.

Clint stared down at them where they were stuck to the corner of his desk in their full, hot-purple glory. He hadn't even realized that hot-purple was a color that existed in the post-it lineup until right then. Probably for the best, too, because he wondered whether his eyes would ever recover. The top-most post-it was emblazoned with the number fourteen written in dark marker, and a quick flip through the rest of them revealed that they counted down from fourteen to zero.

He thought about tossing them, but he had a before-school to-do list as long as his arm and decided just to leave them alone. Good thing, because halfway through his first class that morning, he realized what the post-its were counting down *to*.

At lunch, he ducked into the teacher's lounge just long enough to crowd Phil up against the fridge. "Hi," he said, pretty much crumpling Phil's lunch bag between their bodies.

"You know you have lunch duty, right?" Phil asked, even though Clint caught the tiny smile pushing at his mouth.

"Yeah, I know. I just wanted to thank you for the countdown."

"The what?"

"Don't play dumb."

"I'm not." The frown creasing Phil's face actually looked pretty genuine. "What are you talking about?"

"The post-it note anniversary countdown on my desk."

"Clint, when would I have had the chance to sneak into your room long enough to set up a post-it countdown?" Clint watched him shake his head. "It wasn't me."

"Then who?"

"Stark, maybe?" Phil shrugged. "Ask the closet romantic, not me."

Despite his confusion, Clint grinned. "I've known you to get romantic in a few closets. In fact, if the walls of that one in the library could talk . . ."

He wiggled his eyebrows, and Phil huffed a sigh as he rolled his eyes. Clint knew he was the only one in the world who could recognize the warmth the smile Phil tried to hide, or the fondness in his voice when he said, "We have lunch posts."

"Yeah, yeah," Clint responded, but stole a half-brushed kiss before he wandered out of the room.

Stark, predictably, denied knowing anything about the post-its, and Clint—also predictably—forgot they were there.

Until the morning of September 29, when he discovered that the top-most post-it was gone and now displaying the number thirteen.

The thirteen was a twelve on September 30, and, after walking his kids down to the bus that

afternoon, Clint came back into his room to discover a manila envelope in the middle of his desk. Someone had printed out an address label for the front, which advertised **CLINT BARTON: CONFIDENTIAL** in enormous, bold font.

Clint glanced around before he opened it and tipped what appeared to be a magazine out onto his desk. The glossy cover read *Male Power* and featured a muscular man in a black tank and a pair of black boxer-briefs. Not bad to look at, Clint reasoned, but he still couldn't shake the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The feeling opened up into a ten-foot wide sinkhole when he flipped to a random page and—

"Okay, whoa, keep your porn at home!" a voice announced, and Clint nearly tripped backward over his desk chair to discover Carol Danvers and Jessica Drew both looming over his desk with predatory grins. Actually, Carol's grin was predatory; Jessica's grin was more awe-struck, and she reached slowly for the magazine. Carol reached over and slapped her hand. "The hell are you reading in your classroom, Barton?"

"I wasn't doing anything!" Clint defended. "It just showed up on my desk!"

"I didn't even know men's underwear catalogues existed," Jessica commented. She tipped her head all the way to the side. "Hey, the mesh ones come in hot-pink!"

"Would you—" Clint started to snap at her, and reached to flip the catalogue closed. The back cover didn't quite flip all the way over, though, leaving exposed a picture of a man who was, well, mostly-exposed. Jessica's jaw dropped open at the skimpy thong on the extremely built man. Clint felt the tips of his ears burn red and tossed the envelope over top of it. "It's not mine!"

"It's on your desk," Carol pointed out.

"And the envelope has your name on it," Jessica added.

"It just appeared here!" Clint spread out his hands. "Two days ago, the post-its, today, the—"

"Filthy, mostly-naked men?" Jessica offered, reaching for the envelope.

"I hate you both," Clint decided, right then and there, and gathered the whole mess up. He shoved the catalogue back in the envelope, opened his bottom desk drawer, and threw it in. "I don't know where it came from, and I don't *want*—"

This time, the phone interrupted him. He groaned and snatched up the receiver. "What?" he demanded.

"Uh, hi, nice to hear from you, too," Darcy Lewis, the perky new front secretary said. She popped her gum on the other end of the phone. "Who pissed in your soup, Prince Charming?"

"I don't think that's the saying."

"It is if I say it is. Brenna Hamilton's mom is on the line."

Clint sighed. "Of course she is. Patch her through." He waved Carol and Jessica off as the world's most helicopter-tastic "helicopter mom" started into her usual mid-week rant.

When he finished with the (half-hour long) phone call and a bit of grading, he wandered into the library to collect Phil. The librarian was kneeling in the early-reading section, reshelving whatever havoc the second graders caused that day. Clint tried not to stare at the line of his back and ass

before he said, "Hey, you ready to go?"

"Depends," Phil said without looking up.

"On?"

"On whether you plan on sharing your after-school porn with me."

Clint groaned. "I hate them."

"I'm sure."

October 1 went off without a hitch, followed by the weekend and October 4. Sure, the post-its kept counting down, but there were no more terrifying magazines.

Except on October 5—post-it countdown day six—when Clint walked into his room after the kids went down to the buses to find the manila envelope on his desk again.

He groaned aloud, grabbed the stupid thing, and marched it down to Carol's room. "You went into my desk?" he accused.

She glanced up from her literal pile of paperwork and scowled at him. "What?"

"I thought you'd let this go, not that you'd dig in and—"

"I have been updating IEPs all day, Barton," she retorted. Clint realized belatedly that her mess of blonde hair was twisted around three different pencils just to stay out of her face. He frowned. "I haven't had time to deal with your drama yet, and I still don't."

"I thought—"

"You thought wrong." She dropped her attention back to her pile. "Go away now, Mama's busy."

Clint rolled his eyes and stalked out of her room. Halfway back to his room's garbage can—the only place the *Male Power* catalogue belonged—he noticed that this envelope had a different label.

Specifically, it read **SERIOUSLY DO NOT THROW THIS ONE AWAY I MEAN IT.**

Clint stopped in the middle of the hallway, cracked open the envelope, and slowly slid out the contents. Never before had he been so grateful that the hallway was empty.

Instead of heading back to his classroom this time, he made a straight-and-true beeline for the library. The place was pretty quiet, but he still glanced around to check for students before he walked up and tossed his newest acquisition onto the circulation desk.

"Please tell me this one's you, 'cause otherwise I'm gonna lose my mind."

Phil, who'd been digging through the books that'd been returned that day, twisted around long enough to peer at the item on the desk. Peered, then walked toward it, then—

Then, the unflappable Phil Coulson actually blanched. "Is that—"

"Yeah."

"With an assortment of—"

"Yup."

"And the pages are—"

"Tabbed with suggestions!" Clint finished. Actually, he announced it more than anything else, his voice carrying through the library. Tony popped out of the computer lab like a jack-in-the-box, Steve right on his heels. Clint silently cursed the district's decision to switch to computerized attendance and grade books—and Steve's inability to figure out how either thing worked.

Phil glanced up at him, concern written across his face, and Clint sighed. "The first one, fine, but if this isn't your joke, I'm not sure—"

Steve closed just enough distance between the lab and the desk to get an eyeful of what was spread out in front of them—and then froze. "Is that a whole magazine—"

"Catalogue, we call them catalogues," Tony corrected.

"—filled with, well—"

"Sex toys," Tony confirmed. He leaned bodily over the catalogue. "Oh, wow, some of those are pretty fantastic, guys, I don't know what you're—"

"Give me that," Phil grumbled, grabbing it and rolling it up into a tight cylinder before Tony could study it too closely.

Tony rolled his eyes. "A guy's gotta keep his own life spicy, Coulson. Just because you and your hubby don't believe in trying anything new in the bedroom—"

"You have less than no basis for that," Clint pointed out.

"—doesn't mean some of us don't like to keep our options open. In a variety of shapes. And lengths."

"And colors," Steve observed. Clint turned to stare at him, and watched as the art teacher's ears turned bright red. "I just happened to notice," he defended.

"I think I hate all of you," Clint decided right then, throwing up his hands. He saw Tony start to open his mouth, though, so he quickly added, "Except Phil. All of you *except* Phil."

He was certain Tony had a come-back for that one, too, when the intercom sparked to life. "Mister Barton, you're needed in the front office. Mister Barton, please apparate yourself to the front office."

Phil sighed. "I'm hiding the *Harry Potter* books from her."

Clint was only halfway to the doors when he heard Stark ask, "So, are you going to order out of that or what?"—followed immediately by the distinct sound of someone battering him over the head with a rolled-up catalogue.

On October 6, Clint crept back into his classroom after his kids were gone and only remembered how to breathe after he discovered his desk was bare.

On October 7, however—

"Bridge too far, Stark," he finally said, and dropped the pamphlet on May Parker's desk.

Tony nailed his head on the underside of the desk before he crawled out, cables hanging from his mouth and needle-nosed pliers tucked into the pocket of his work shirt. "Wha ah—" he attempted to say, then spat the cords out of his mouth. "What are you talking about?"

"I know it's you," Clint accused.

"I am many things, all of which are wonderful beyond your imagination, but you at least gotta give me a heads up of what amazing deed I've accomplished this time."

"This prank."

"What prank? I'm pranking someone without knowing? I'm a genius!" He paused. "Well, make that 'more of a genius than usual,' because I'm always—"

Clint narrowed his eyes. "Stark."

"Barton?"

"Just own to it."

"Not sure what I'm owing to, here, buddy."

"This." Clint picked up the pamphlet and handed it down to Tony.

Tony sat back on his legs and squinted at it for a few seconds. "It's for a cruise."

"Open to the next page."

"Barton, listen, I don't know if being married to Coulson's finally caused your usually-sharp brain to turn to weird mush or something, but I—"

And then, Tony stopped talking.

He stopped talking, his eyes went wide, and Clint actually got to watch the wheels in his head start jumping to life. He blinked, tilted the pamphlet to the side, squinted, and then, finally, grinned.

A slow-burn Cheshire cat grin that crinkled his laugh lines and sparked in his eyes.

"This is great," he decided.

"Stark—"

"No, no, it's great. Can I keep this? I think I want to keep this. I mean, it's basically *The Dirty, Dirty Love Boat*. Maybe I could help them with a slogan. 'Swing around the Seven Seas as you swing on your spouse.'"

"Stark—"

"Think Pep'd be into it? We could make it one big double date, the four of us, I bet if we lubed them up with drinks, she and Coulson might—"

"You know this is sexual harassment, right?" Clint accused, pointing a finger at him. "The underwear, the sex toys, that's fine, but this is crossing a line that even for *you* is a little—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait, hold your horses," Tony defended. He tossed the pamphlet onto the carpet and then rocked up onto his feet, hands in the air. "I am, arguably, an ass, a playboy, a genius, and

maybe a *little* bit of a slut—"

"Little?"

"—but you're right that this is stepping over the lines I usually balance so delicately on." He dropped his hands. "Seriously, it's not me. I mean, c'mon, when've I pulled something as brilliant as this asshole is pulling and not immediately owned up to it?"

Clint opened his mouth to argue, but the noise of somebody clear their throat interrupted him. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Darcy standing in the doorway. "Uh, sorry," she interrupted, her usual greeting (involving puns or a comment about Clint's ass, whichever was easier) significantly subdued. "Pepper wanted me to grab you—"

"Where?" Tony asked, grinning.

"—to talk about that student whose mom's in the hospital," she finished. "And by you, I mean the hot one, not the one who kind of smells like batteries all the time."

"The smelly one's you," Tony declared. Clint rolled his eyes—and took the pamphlet—before following Darcy out.

On October 8—the last Friday before fall break—Clint came in to find the post-it countdown unchanged. He frowned, crumpled up the top note, and left the four on display. He spent part of the time his kids were at specials wondering about why the mystery countdown master hadn't swung by and switched out the numbers, but otherwise, he kind of forgot about it.

At least until he came into his classroom after bus duty and found—

"Look, I'm really sorry," Darcy said, sliding off the edge of Clint's desk and raising both her hands. "I thought it'd be funny. You guys are super cute and I wanted to do silly stuff for your anniversary coming up, and I had no idea that you'd freak out."

Clint blinked at her. "Wait, what?" he asked, freezing in the doorway. She dropped her arms to her sides and stared at the floor. "You— It was *you*? You're the—underwear-catalogue, sex-toy catalogue, swingers-cruise fiend?"

She nodded.

"*Why*?"

"Natasha and I got mani-pedis, like, my second week here," she said after a few seconds, raising her eyes just enough to glance over at Clint. "And I asked what your deal was, because hi, you're pretty much a man mountain of hot that deserves, like, shrines and stuff —"

"Uh, thanks?"

"—and she told me your whole epic love story with Coulson. Like, from how you guys first hung out at a sports bar by accident to the fact you pretty much fell in love after your first date—"

Clint's ears burned. "It wasn't *that* fast," he defended, but then again, they'd practically started living together two months after they started dating.

"—and how you proposed right before your first anniversary. And it just— God, I don't know how you got to be hot and *adorable*, with your dog and the wedding pictures Natasha showed me on her phone and your Thai place, but . . . " She shrugged. "I've been working the whole last week and a

half to get people to chip in to get you guys a spa day or something—I have like a hundred bucks already—but I thought it'd maybe be fun to leave random crap on your desk and kind of freak you out first." She dragged her fingers through her mess of curls. When she sighed, her whole body kind of bounced, like she was trying to release unwanted tension. "I really just thought it'd be stupid-funny, that's all."

Clint stared at her for a couple more seconds, until the silence apparently got to be too much and she dropped her head to stare at the floor again. She'd only been at the school for a couple months, and Clint knew she was a little—well, she was Darcy. There really wasn't a better word than that.

Finally, he asked, "Spa day?"

Darcy's head jerked up. "Uh, yeah," she answered, frowning at him. "I'm here before anybody else and most days I'm one of the last people to leave and you know what I've noticed? You and Coulson are here all the time. I think you work harder than pretty much everybody, except maybe Bruce. I mean, Phil does AR and you pretty much know the history of every family who's had a fifth grader since the beginning of time. I really wanted to do something nice; I just did what I always do and wrapped it up in a big ball of crazy ribbon."

Despite himself, Clint grinned a little. "Crazy ribbon?"

"The only kind of ribbon I know."

He laughed at that, and he was kind of glad to see Darcy start to crack a smile. She rocked back on the heels of her shoes—flats today, but neon-green ones covered in sequins that made them look like snake skin—and he sighed. "Listen, the catalogues were kinda weird," he finally said, "but I appreciate you trying to do something decent for us. Crazy ribbon and all."

Her eyes sparked. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Just stick with the post-it countdown and the end surprise from here on in, okay?"

"I can do that. Listen, I—" She hesitated, chewing on her lower lip for a second. "I love that this whole place is like a family. I love how much everybody gets along and likes each other. That's really cool. So if this screwed it up—"

"It didn't," Clint interrupted, "as long as you, y'know, stop."

"Done!" she agreed.

On October 12, the last day before actual fall break, Clint walked into his classroom to find the post-it countdown at zero and a pretty ridiculous hot-pink envelope on his desk. When he opened it, a whole variety of gift cards fell out: one to Starbucks, one to the Thai place he and Phil always went to, one to the bakery Phil constantly got scones from, one to the movie theater in town, one to the fancy pet-store that sold all sorts of gourmet pet stuff.

I figured this'd maybe be better than a spa day, the note from Darcy read.

Clint'd never seen Darcy grin as hard as when he stopped in the office to hug her before he and Phil left for a long weekend away.

"I'm not letting you near the Starbucks card," Phil warned on their way out to the car.

Clint laughed. "Good luck with that."

October 12 – One Year Ago

"This is the worst of all our anniversaries," Clint grumbled from behind the cotton candy machine.

"You know that's a lie," Phil replied, and handed off another spool of candy to an already sticky-faced first-grader.

Clint sent him a sour look before plucking another paper stick from the packet and starting to wind more cotton candy.

The idea for a fall fun fair had originated somewhere on the first floor of the building, although where, exactly, Phil wasn't sure. Bruce'd vaguely mentioned at one of the payday happy hours in September, and Phil thought he'd heard murmur in the front office at some point, but no one seemed to know exactly who had decided it would be a good idea to team up with the PTA and host a miniature carnival on school grounds. And really, it was a carnival; Thor Odinson had somehow managed to secure not only a wide array of "throw the ball in the cup" games but also a bounce house and one of those inflatable obstacle courses.

If Phil were being honest, he'd admit he liked the idea of an all-school event in the fall; a chance for parents and teachers to see each other as human before parent-teacher conferences.

What he didn't like was—

"We paid for the boarder's," Clint grouched, shaking his head. "We rented the place. We booked the room. Set the whole thing up 'cause of your sister getting that award—"

"I told you three times we don't have to go to the reception," Phil said with a sigh.

"—over our break, and now we miss out on our first night of kinky hotel sex because of this." Clint gestured to the cotton candy machine in front of him. "A first-grader could've handled this, Phil. Pick any one of Bruce's kids, even, they could—"

As if on cue, a crash sounded just beyond the propped-open gym doors, and a dozen-plus people turned to look as one of Thor Odinson's children—the oldest, Phil recognized, and a first-grader—darted into the gym and ducked under one of the prize tables. "It is fine!" Thor himself announced, coming through the doors and opening his arms. "A few of the fishbowls from the goldfish game fell off the table! The fish have been rescued!"

Most of the parents and children turned back to what they were doing, but Phil watched as Thor scanned the gym before stalking out toward the classrooms. The Odinson boy only reappeared after his father was long-gone.

Phil handed off another couple sticks of cotton candy before glancing back at Clint. "You were saying?"

Clint huffed. "Kinky hotel sex."

"Or kinky bedroom sex," Phil muttered under his breath, and Clint grinned before showing off his cotton-candy making skills to a couple of fourth graders passing by.

The two of them were scheduled to man the cotton candy table for the whole length of the fun fair—after school until seven, four hours originally devoted to driving to a quiet hotel and, well, spending their anniversary in bed—but by about six, the foot traffic started to dwindle. Phil snagged Clint's wallet from his back pocket and left him standing at the machine while he went to pick them up a dinner of hot dogs and potato chips.

He only made it as far as the ticket booth outside before heading right back into the gym.

"Wha—" Clint greeted him as he reached around and shut off the cotton candy machine in the middle of one of Clint's more complicated stick-twirls. "Phil, what's—"

"I am about to give you the anniversary gift you didn't even know you wanted," Phil replied. When Clint didn't budge, he broke his usual professional character and snagged Clint by the arm. "Come with me."

"I don't—"

"Just *come*," Phil repeated, and ignored when Clint muttered something that sounded distinctly like *another thing we could've done at the hotel all afternoon*.

The October sun was swiftly setting outside, a sure sign that the outdoor games would be ending soon, excepting one thing: Tony Stark. Specifically, a gloating, grinning Tony Stark who laughed aloud as a third grader's valiant effort at a well-honed pitch sailed far to the left of target.

The ball pinged off the dunk tank's metal cage and the kid grumbled.

And at Phil's side, Clint froze.

In Phil's defense, he'd forgotten about the dunk tank at all, mostly because he'd stalwartly refused to sign up for a round despite all of Thor's promises that the kids wouldn't be able to hit the target. Steve'd kindly taken one for the team (and then spent three days blanching every time Carol mentioned wet t-shirt contests), and Jasper, the part-time speech pathologist Bobby Drake, and Darcy all agreed to suffer the indignity as well.

So, apparently, had Tony Stark. A dry, grinning Tony Stark who announced, "C'mon, someone's got to have better hand-eye coordination than that! Did Mavis Beacon teach you kids nothing?"

Very, very slowly, Clint looked over to Phil. "Pinch me."

"I'll do you one better," Phil offered, and held up the five dollars of tickets.

Tony, unsurprisingly, kept gloating through the whole exchange, though his smile slipped noticeably when Clint stepped up to the line and handed Pepper, the ticket-taker, his five pitches worth of tickets. "You're not allowed to play."

"Nothing says I'm not," Clint replied, stretching his arms over his head.

Tony looked immediately to Pepper. "Miss Potts, he's a teacher. Teachers aren't allowed to play dunk tank when other teachers are in the dunk tank. It's against the Geneva Convention or something."

"He paid," Pepper said serenely. Phil detected a hint of a devilish smile.

"I'll pay five *hundred* dollars if you take the balls away from him right now. In fact, take all balls away from him, any ball in the universe, maybe don't let him near tightly-packed wads of tinfoil —"

"Why, Stark?" Clint interrupted. "You scared?"

"Scared? *Scared*?" Tony stared at him. "You have the world's creepiest ability to throw anything at any other thing and hit it. You've made backwards blind shots at the trash can from across the

room, Barton."

Clint weighed the baseball between his hands. "So?"

"So, I can add and I'm currently dry and— Augh!"

Phil wasn't certain whether Tony's helpless shout or the splash was more satisfying, but then, they came one right after the other. When he broke the surface of the water, he sputtered and shook his head. "Okay, a little warning next time, you could drown a guy mid-rant."

"One down," Pepper observed.

"No way is he doing that again, once is enough—"

"I bought five tickets," Phil pointed out. Tony shot him the world's dirtiest glare, but Phil simply smiled back. "A present."

"Is this revenge for giving Thor your e-mail address after you tried to skip out on this thing for—" Tony glanced around at the crowd of kids and parents that was slowly gathering around the dunk tank. "—totally mundane Friday evening things that only ever happen on October twelfth?"

"Happens more often than that," Clint responded as Tony hauled himself up onto the seat.

Tony rolled his eyes. "You keep saying that, but I— Gah!"

Phil decided he liked the splash the best.

Two hours later, after Tony was unceremoniously dunked five times and all the cotton candy had finally gone home with already sugar-high children, Clint pressed Phil up against the car in the mostly-empty parking lot and kissed him. It wasn't the promised "kinky sex" kiss Clint'd complained for three days that he'd miss out on for the fair, no urgency or demand, but it was lazy and tasted like spun sugar. Phil hooked fingers in his husband's belt loops and returned the favor for a long while, until they were both a little breathless and someone nearby laid on a car horn.

"Get a room!" Tony jeered from inside his sports car. His hair stuck up at weird angles, and Phil could tell at just a glance that his shirt was still damp.

"That was the plan 'till the fun fair!" Clint returned, and he and Phil both laughed when Tony flipped them off before gunning the engine and racing away.

They were still laughing, inches away from one another, when Clint commented, "Officially the second-best anniversary yet."

"Second?"

"Well, you did marry me the other time. Pretty hard to beat that."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Only pretty hard?"

"Hey, knowing you, you might be able to pull it off. You did buy me tickets to dunk Tony."

"I just knew they were the gift for the man who already has everything."

"I do already have everything," Clint replied, and his hands climbed slowly up Phil's sides. "Like I said, I got to marry you."

And it was amazing, really, that even after five full years together, Phil still felt bashful and stupid when Clint was so bare-facedly sincere. "I love you, too."

"Yeah, you do," Clint informed him, and kissed him again.

A Few Days Before October 12 – This Year

Their friends were horrible at keeping secrets. Well, mostly Steve and his too-earnest face. So what was supposed to be a surprise fifth anniversary party at Tony and Pepper's became an act-surprised fifth anniversary party.

It took place on a Sunday evening, a few days before their actual anniversary. Pepper invited the couple over for dinner, and the men played along at being ignorant up to and including seeing a number of familiar cars parked in and around the driveway of the Stark mansion. They walked in to the huge house to a resounding chorus of "Surprise!"

Clint clasped a hand to his chest and asked "For me?"

Phil gave an eye-roll and gentle shove at his husband while smiling and thanking the guests.

Outstretched arms came toward them, mostly Phil's family at first. The parents, followed by Susan and her brood—husband Mark, and her three high school aged sons. Christine, her husband, their son and daughter went last. Handshakes, hugs, and back-slaps were then traded back and forth with the members of their school family.

A smattering of finger foods and decadent desserts were the food offerings of the evening since Brad and Andy—Susan's fifteen-year-old twins—had peanut allergies and weren't allowed anywhere near things like Pad Thai. Phil caught Clint eyeing the sweets and elbowed him in that direction.

"You want anything?"

Phil shook his head no and moved towards where Bucky and Natasha were talking quietly with each other. As he approached, Bucky paused his conversation to give a smile and "Congratulations" to Phil.

"Thank you," he replied with a smile before turning to Natasha. "You sure you're okay to take Birdie while we're gone? We tried to board her last year, and she absolutely hated it and us for a few days when we got back."

"It's fine," Natasha reassured him.

"Where are you guys going?" Bucky asked.

"Back to the cabin we rented on our honeymoon." Phil answered before giving a shy smile to Natasha. "Need to make sure a certain item is still attached to a nearby bridge."

"Yeah, but that's going to be a Day Two activity," Clint announced around a mouthful of cheesecake as he walked up to the trio. "I have other priorities in mind."

"Let me guess," Natasha said, "you got him a couple of ties for your anniversary present?"

Clint's smug grin was enough of an answer.

"I'm missing something," Bucky replied.

"I married a clothes whore," Clint explained.

"The phrase is actually 'clothes horse,'" Phil corrected.

Clint shrugged. "I like my way better. Anyway, the rule is that *someone* in this marriage can only own a certain number of ties. If he goes above that number, I get to find ways to ruin the extras." He made sure to give an exaggerated waggle of his eyebrows to go along with the last part of his explanation.

"And I now know way more about the two of you than I needed," Bucky said causing Clint to laugh.

Natasha raised a single eyebrow at her old friend. "James, maybe you need to start investing in some ties to give to someone."

Bucky smirked at her in return. "Say, Nat, a certain friend of yours wouldn't be allergic to dogs, would they? Wouldn't want you to miss out on some benefits because you're dogsitting."

Natasha shot him a look that made Phil cringe internally. "I'm going to go talk to Steve," she announced before turning and walking away.

"Nat—no," Bucky pleaded while chasing after her. "Nat, I'm sorry!"

"You have any clue what that was about?" Clint asked around another mouthful of dessert.

"One half is pretty obvious; the other I'm not touching with a ten foot pole."

"Smart move. Oh, heads up, Tony's moving in to talk to Mom."

Phil sighed. "I'll take care of this, you go mingle."

"You're not going to tell me to avoid eating only dessert tonight?"

Phil shrugged. "Why waste my breath?"

Clint leaned in closer with devious grin. "Don't even bother with that act. I know how much you love my methods for burning off the extra calories."

"Does that mean I'm getting my ties before our actual anniversary this year?"

"I think an arrangement could be made."

Phil grinned and pulled Clint in for a cheesecake-flavored kiss before making sure Tony wasn't being too much of himself around Judy.

"Well, hope for a late-November blizzard in Virginia," Tony stated.

"Why would she be hoping for that, Stark?" Phil asked.

"Oh, hush," Judy said while swatting at her son's arm. "I was just asking when he was going to come back and join us for Thanksgiving—"

"Because that went so well?" Phil muttered.

"You just hate the fact that I've now seen every one of your baby pictures," Tony replied with a smirk.

"—and this time he can bring Pepper, and it would be lovely."

"Pepper would be lovely, yes, I would agree to that," Phil said.

"Judy, I, unlike your miscreant son, will sincerely hope that travel plans to Virginia will be canceled so we can join you for Thanksgiving festivities. God knows you don't make me want to go back to drinking like my in-laws."

"Be nice," Judy reprimanded. "Those people gave you a beautiful wife."

"They also make me miss alcohol more than the first graders. Okay, that's a lie. More than the third graders, let's go with that."

"They can't be that bad," Phil countered.

"They live on a farm, Coulson. A farm. You've seen the shoes I wear. They are all way too expensive to wear within a mile of manure."

"Well," Judy said turning to Phil. "What about Bruce or Natasha? Will they be joining us this year?"

Phil smiled down at her. He loved his mom's willingness to take in his friends who didn't have family around for holidays. "I haven't asked yet."

"Well, October is going to be half-over soon. You need to find out."

"I'm well aware of how far we are into October, Mom."

Two hours and a few glasses of champagne later, Phil found himself off in a corner chatting with Pepper. He looked around the room at the touches she'd added and the laughter that easily filled the large space. "You know, when we were here for our reception, this place just seemed huge and empty. You've made his house a home."

Pepper smiled at him. "Clint warned me about you getting sappy at these kinds of things."

Phil shrugged. "Champagne probably isn't helping matters."

Pepper laughed before placing a light kiss on his cheek. "Thank you," she said with a shy grin. "Oh, I almost forgot—Steve!" The art teacher looked over from where he was discussing something with Darcy, Carol, and Bruce. Pepper waved him over. "I forgot to tell you, Tony got extra tickets to that art gallery opening in a few weeks. You want to come? You could bring a date."

"Umm, sure," Steve replied. "I'd be happy to go. I don't know if I can find a date by then."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "You've walked by a mirror at some point in your life, right?"

The other man blushed, but it became even more noticeable when the words "You could bring your coffee friend" fell out of Phil's mouth.

Steve's blond eyebrows shot up in surprise, and Phil caught him sneaking a quick look in Bucky's direction before the art teacher schooled his face into a more neutral expression. "Heard about that, huh?"

Phil shrugged. "Not everyone knows. And I'm not going to tell."

"Thanks," he replied softly.

A loud, electronic squeal interrupted the conversation causing Pepper to sigh. "I told him no karaoke tonight," she muttered before walking away to detour her husband from his latest round of antics.

"Look," Phil said, "and this could be the champagne talking, and you don't have to pay attention to this since I'm not officially your mentor anymore, but—" He paused and looked over to where Clint was gently correcting their niece's fingers into the proper sign for history. Annie had harbored a bit of a crush on her Uncle Clint since the first time they'd met when she was three, and Phil couldn't really blame her. "I wasted a whole year. Who knows how much more time I would've thrown away if he hadn't have cornered me in the library after that staff meeting, demanding a date.

"I'm not saying you've found a perfect match, maybe you have maybe you haven't. But you're never going to know unless you give it a shot. Don't be an idiot like me and be too scared to give it a try."

He caught Steve's attention drift over to the brown-haired man in a conversation with Christine and Susan. Phil tried not to cringe outwardly at the sight. "They're probably interrogating the new blood; you might want to go rescue him."

"Yeah," Steve breathed. He began to walk away, but turned back a moment later. He worked his mouth but no words came immediately. He shook his head with a smile and turned back to walk toward Bucky.

"So are you ready to get of here yet?" a hot breath whispered against Phil's neck before Clint snuck a quick kiss there.

Phil leaned back against Clint's chest when a strong arm wrapped around his waist. "I take it you are."

"You just had to bring up ties. It's all I've thought about for the last two-and-a-half hours."

"Technically that was Natasha," Phil pointed out, and then giggled at the eye roll Clint gave him.

"How much have you had to drink?" Clint asked at the sound of his husband's laughter.

"I like the way the bubbles feel on my tongue."

"I can think of some other things I'd rather feel on my tongue," Clint hummed against his neck, and Phil had to swallow a moan.

"We should say goodbye," Phil pointed out.

"We've been married for five years—"

"Four years, three-hundred-sixty-three days."

"Whatever, nerd. They'll put two and two together if we sneak out of here. They should all be used to it by now."

"Are we going out the backyard?"

"Seems like the easiest escape route at the moment."

"Are you going to fall in the pool again?"

"That was one time, Phil. And are you going to be trying to shove your hands down my pants? Because that's the only reason that happened."

"I'll try and restrain myself."

"Only when we walk by the pool. And when I'm driving. Otherwise, your hands are more than welcome."

Phil turned in his husband's arms and kissed the man's jaw. "Love you," he breathed.

Clint caught Phil's lips against his own before pulling away and saying, "Love you, too. Now can we please leave?"

"Fine, but you're explaining to Mom why we left without telling her goodbye."

Clint paused a moment, obviously weighing the actions at hand. He shrugged. "Worth it."

Coffee and Other Vices

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we explore the group's addiction to coffee. And the boys finally get their act together. Somewhat.

It started on a Monday. Those on staff who made it to school early enough to stop in the lounge for a cup of coffee were sorely disappointed. It wasn't the first time the machine had been on the fritz, which wasn't surprising since the coffee maker looked old enough to have existed since the school was constructed thirty years prior.

As the clock inched closer to eight-thirty, Darcy noticed an increase in foot traffic in and out of nearby teacher's lounge from her vantage point behind the desk in the main office. She tried not to laugh out loud like an evil villain at the poor, uneducated masses while she sipped her macchiato. She'd only tried the coffee the school provided to the staff once on her very first day of work, and as a result, Darcy went on a strict coffee binge of premium blends to purge the vile taste of toxic waste from her tongue.

So it was with a faux-mournful heart that Darcy included the news in her morning announcements that day. "Now, kiddos, be sure to be extra nice to your teachers today. Most of them will be suffering from something called withdrawal, because we have suffered a loss this morning: Mister Coffee passed away over the weekend. He was beloved by many around here, and Miss Potts will be available for counseling to those who need it. A memorial will be scheduled for some time in the future once his relatives—the shady microwave and rip-off vending machine, both of the magical, mysterious land known as The Teacher's Lounge, can set up a time. Our deepest sympathies goes out to those teachers who have completely lost all sense of taste and thought his products were a decent way to caffeinate themselves. Those of us who don't believe in drinking sludge will be awake today—thank you, Starbucks."

She paused to smirk at the handwritten note scrawled in the margin of her announcements print out from her boss. "Oh, and, a special note to Mister Stark. Principal Fury requested that you not attempt to resurrect the thing like it's some version of Frankenstein's monster. Students, make sure you rub it Mister Stark's face—I mean, gently remind him oh so politely that Principal Fury said he couldn't fix the coffee machine.

"And kids, if you don't get the Frankenstein joke, ask Mister Barton or Mister Coulson about it. And if you do get that joke, ask them questions anyway. They *love* answering questions; especially the kind of questions your parents don't like to answer, so make sure—"

"Lewis!" Fury bellowed from his office. "You have anything of use to say?"

"Ugh, fine. Okay, kids, be good and be nice to your teachers, because Mondays are awful enough as it is. And if you don't believe that, just wait. Soon you will reach the age where naps are once again awesome and—"

"Lewis!"

"Okay, fine. Lunch today is hamburgers. Since most of you can't see me just know I did air quotes

when I said that. The so-called beef will be accompanied by various side dishes. Bon appetit.

"And this morning, we have a few members from Miss Drew's class to help us with the pledge. Why don't you guys tell us your names, your favorite color, and who you're dating, and we'll get things started."

The pledge, let alone the rest of the announcements, weren't even over before Darcy had an email in her inbox from Tony that with the subject line *RE: I have a frakking masters in mech engineering* that was sent to both her and Fury. The body of the message contained two words: *Challenge accepted.*

Darcy, per regulation set up by Tony's wife, forwarded the message on to Pepper to give her a head's up. The guidance counselor's reply pinged its way into Darcy's inbox almost immediately.

At least he remembered to censor his language all on his own. Baby steps. I'll make sure he doesn't burn down the school.

"What are you doing?" Pepper asked.

"I'm engineering," Tony retorted, screwdriver hanging out of his mouth.

"And I'm making sure someone's present to dial nine-one-one when he electrocutes himself," Bruce added, turning a page in the Scholastic book catalogue he was browsing.

In retrospect, Pepper should have suspected that Tony was up to no good when he didn't show up in her office immediately after school and demand any number of sexual favors, but she'd tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, marrying a giant man-child meant enduring his moods and his occasional decision to spend three hours playing Bejeweled in the computer lab. He denied the obsession, but she knew better.

But instinct was a funny thing.

And instinct led her into the teacher's lounge.

The remnants of the coffee machine were littered all over the big table in the middle of the room, screws, nuts, and bolts scattered everywhere. Wires poked out of various parts of dismantled circuitry and Tony's soldering iron balanced precariously on the edge of the table. He squinted and leaned closer to the machine, poking it slightly with his finger.

Pepper leaned to check and make sure it was unplugged, then stood up and put her hands on her hips. "We talked about this," she reminded him.

"No," Tony replied, raising his head. "You talked about it. You talked, you listed reasons, and I considered every one of those very good reasons before deciding that I still have a master's degree and can still fix a coffee maker that's older than most our kids' parents."

"It's not that old," Bruce commented.

"Was it here when you started?"

"I—"

"Yes or no answer, Banner."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Yes," he answered, "but—"

"No ifs, no buts, no coconuts." Tony pointed his screwdriver at Bruce, then at Pepper, and then at his own chest. "I'm fixing it."

"You will kill someone," Pepper pointed out. Tony huffed into his upper lip and bent closer to the machine. He poked it with the screwdriver this time, and Pepper double-checked to make sure it *really* was unplugged, just in case. "Ideally yourself, because then I'll inherit your estate—"

"Provided you're named in my will, which you might not be if you keep talking like that," Tony returned.

"—but I'd like it if you didn't take the entire school out with you."

Even as he turned another page in the Scholastic catalogue, Bruce smiled.

Tony, however, did not. Tony scowled like Pepper'd personally insulted his manhood (she'd only done that once, and in her defense, he'd been acting like an asshole and deserved it) and reached for one of the discarded pieces of circuitry. "Saying that I can't repair something as simple as a coffee maker—"

"Never said that," she put in.

"—is like . . . Like. Well. It's like something horribly insulting and completely untoward. Bruce, help me out, gimme a metaphor."

Bruce looked up from the catalogue. "And get on Pepper's bad side? No."

Tony's head snapped up, and he shot Bruce a wounded look. "Banner."

"Yes?"

"The code, Banner."

"What code?"

"Bros before—"

"Do *not* finish that sentence," Pepper warned, leveling a finger in Tony's direction. He glanced up at her for a moment. She could actually watch him process his options before he dropped his eyes back to the machine.

"Still fixing it," he muttered.

Pepper sighed. "Tony," she said, trying to summon her most cajoling, most supportive tone. Sometimes this was very difficult, given her husband's, well, everything about him, really. "Do you remember our broken vacuum?"

Tony's eyes flicked up. "Yeah, but I don't see how—"

"And our toaster?"

"That wasn't even broken, that was just the after-effects of leaky toaster strudel—"

"And our VCR?"

"In my defense, nobody in their right mind even owns a VCR anymore, a VCR's straight out of the '80s and frankly, they should've died along with acid-wash jeans and—"

"You never fixed any of them!" Pepper declared, throwing out her hands. Miraculously, it shut Tony up enough that she could glare at him. "Tony, every time you've attempted to 'fix' a broken appliance in our house, you have turned it into a smoking, smoldering heap of rubble. I've had to use our fire extinguisher!"

Tony glanced over at Bruce. "That's our safe word."

Bruce rolled his eyes.

Pepper bit back a second sigh. "Tony, please," she pleaded. "Do everyone here a favor and give it up as a lost cause."

"No."

"I said please."

"No *thanks*, then," Tony retorted. He reached for the soldering iron, picked it up, and then pointed it at Pepper. "Before I cleaned boogers out of keyboard trays and listened to twenty-five different disembodied voices comment on mastery of the QWERTY row, I created. I was a creator."

"And you certainly don't have a god complex," Bruce intoned.

"And I will not let Nick Fury—who, by the way, has probably never created or engineered anything more impressive than a really complicated office supply order form—detract from my creative brilliance." He flicked the soldering iron on. "I will bring life back to this coffee machine, and the first people to drink its sweet nectar will be those who stood behind me in this time of trial."

He ducked his head again. Pepper looked over at Bruce, who shrugged and shook his head. *All afternoon*, he mouthed.

Pepper rubbed her forehead and then turned on her heel. She knew this was a battle she wouldn't win.

"And," Tony added, and Pepper glanced over her shoulder at him, "I fixed your clock radio."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "It needed a new cord, Tony."

"Still fixed it," he retorted, and returned to his "creationism."

An hour later, she received an e-mail from Bruce that simply read *get the fire extinguisher*.

And an hour and five minutes later, when the fire alarm went off, she closed her eyes as Fury bellowed, "Stark!"

The PTA furnished coffee the next morning. Word had gotten 'round to the Odinsons of the lack of sustenance at the school. Natasha wasn't sure if the couple heard about the staff's woes from their own children or from their regular babysitter—Darcy.

However they found out, Natasha didn't mind. She walked into the lounge to find Darcy helping Jane set up the cardboard containers of coffee from one of the local coffee shops. "Is that hazelnut I smell?"

Jane turned and smiled. "Yes, it is. And I baked some breakfast casseroles, too, in case you haven't eaten."

"What, no brownies?" Darcy pouted.

"It's barely eight in the morning," Natasha replied.

"And?"

Jane rolled her eyes. "Do you know if Doctor Banner is here yet? I wanted to give him a heads up on George."

"What's wrong with Middle Dude?" Darcy asked.

Jane shook her head and flicker of annoyance crossed her face. "Uncle Loki isn't allowed to tell bedtime stories anymore. George's had nightmares since Saturday and has barely slept at all."

Darcy cringed. "He is the worst when he's sleep-deprived. Why didn't you call me to babysit?"

"Your mom said you were busy over fall break."

"Yeah, burning through my Netflix queue. I mean, I didn't tell *her* that was the reason I was busy, but you still could've called." Darcy paused to take a sip of her coffee. "And she probably told you that because she was hoping you'd let her and Dad watch the kids. Bet you didn't know you were going to have I'm-so-desperate-for-grandkids-I'm-going-to-stalk-the-next-door-neighbor's-children weirdos living one door over when you moved in, did you?"

Jane shook her head, but a small smile edged the corners of her mouth up. "They're not that weird."

"You only say that because they're not your parents. And anyway, Banner should be here in the next few minutes."

Natasha nibbled on a slice of some egg casserole with bacon, spinach, and mushrooms while eyeing her fellow staff members coming in to the lounge. Stark arrived bleary eyed a moment later and stumbled towards the offering of caffeine with thanks to whatever deities he could think of pouring from his lips. Once he downed a cup like a large shot and as he poured himself a second, his eyes drifted over to the hulking blond man standing nearby. Tony scrutinized Thor before pointing a finger at him. "Is this preemptive apology coffee? Am I going to regret not calling in sick? Which one of your kids do I have today?" He paused and pulled out his phone to flip through his calendar. "George. Didn't I hear Rogers say that one threw a fit yesterday because he couldn't find a red crayon?"

Thor nodded, remorse on his face. "My younger son has had difficulty finding rest this week, but that is not the purpose of Jane and I providing you with breakfast this morning."

Natasha watched Tony, the skepticism never leaving his face. "Whatever you say, Fabio." He grabbed a second cup and poured another round of coffee before walking over to stand near Natasha and the food-covered table. He inspected the options a moment before taking a step closer to her. "If you were Pepper..."

"Get her a piece of the one without cheese because she doesn't do dairy," Natasha answered.

"Thank you," he replied before snatching up a section of one of the casseroles. "Banner in yet? He's so easy to mock around Jane that I can pull it off even at this time in the morning." Natasha raised a single eyebrow in a silent request for him to elaborate. Tony sighed and rolled his eyes before continuing. "Bruce has a major nerd crush on the Lady Odinson. Every parent-teacher conference between the two of them when he had Spawn Number One devolved into going back and forth on the latest journals they've read. Why do you think he was okay with have Spawn Number Two in

his class this year? He wanted to keep the door open for phone calls and conferences that result in science boners."

"Jealous that someone else is moving in on your territory?"

Tony shook his head. "I only do science boners if machines are involved. Oh! Here he comes—just watch."

Natasha's eyes tracked Bruce entering the teacher's lounge, hair its usual mess of salt and pepper curls and navy dress shirt sleeves already rolled up his forearms even though he hadn't encountered students yet. And sure enough, Jane broke off her conversation with Darcy, who had to beat it back to the office to man the phones.

Natasha watched as Jane talked with her hands, presumably discussing the situation with George. Bruce kept his eyes on the petite woman, serious expression on his face, and he nodded at the appropriate places while fixing himself a cup of coffee. And just as Tony predicted, a moment later, both Jane and Bruce's faces lit up. Natasha could hear bits and pieces of their conversation, but couldn't really follow the discussion on the latest ideas concerning wormholes.

"Told ya," Tony bragged with a smile he quickly hid behind his cup of coffee.

"You should be nice to him. He's the only one on staff that likes you most of the time. And that includes your wife."

"Please, Pep loves me."

"Doesn't mean she always likes you, though," Natasha countered.

"Why wouldn't she like me? I give her mind-blowing orgasms and closets full of shoes. Closets—plural."

"You also leave her food and coffee to grow cold," Natasha replied, giving a nod to the abandoned food and drink Tony'd set down on the table behind them a few minutes prior.

Tony swore under his breath before grabbing the items and making his way towards the office.

He had to duck around James on the way out of the room. James, who still looked half-asleep, and quickly locked eyes with Natasha. He gave her a small wave as he walked over to her. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Free food and coffee. Don't ask questions, just take advantage of the situation."

He gave her smirk. "Applying the rules of your love life to breakfast?"

"Shut up," she replied with a quick smack to his chest, causing him to laugh. She downed the last of her hazelnut coffee. "I'm off to bus duty. So is Steve. Who also likes coffee. You remember Steve, right? The guy across the hall you drool over and—"

"Okay, your turn to shut up now," he hissed at her before bumping her shoulder with his upper arm.

"I'm just saying, he might appreciate you taking some coffee out to him. Or you manning up and asking him out for coffee instead of dancing around the idea for weeks on end."

"Get away from me."

"Love you, too."

"So, who are you screwing?" Carol asked.

Natasha didn't break the warrior pose, but Carol swore she teetered. She sent Carol a dark look as they shifted into the next stance. "I'm going to pretend I heard you wrong."

"Please. At this point, everyone knows you're getting it somewhere." The woman next to her, a pretty dark-haired thing with olive skin and a budding baby bump, shot Carol a suspicious look. Carol smiled and wondered whether she could flip the woman the bird while her hands were flattened to the mat. "You can come clean to me."

"When's the last time you kept a secret?" Natasha asked.

"I keep secrets just fine."

"Until you can leverage them against something you want."

"Yeah, but that's voluntary, not because I'm a gossip." They switched poses again, and Carol wiped sweat out of her eyes. She sometimes suspected she was starting to get too old for this bullshit, given that the college girls on the far right side of the room were giggling while Carol's tank top was nearly soaked through. "You've got Rogers wetting himself," she informed Natasha.

Natasha twisted to glance over in her direction. "What?"

"He's convinced you're making it with the hot new thing." They followed the instructor and switched legs, and Carol swore she heard something pop when she stretched. "I keep telling him he's wrong, but—"

Natasha burst out laughing.

She drew the attention of about half the room, plus the death-glare of the instructor. For a moment, Carol wondered if it was heat stroke or something, because she could count on one hand the number of times the other woman'd actually laughed that loud. Then, Natasha shook her damp curls. "Steve thinks I'm sleeping with James," she said in a tone of disbelief.

"Or about to." Carol shifted into the next position, this one with only one foot on the mat, and stretched her arms over her head. "He's been in sad-puppy mode about it for a couple weeks. He plays a good game, but I think his number one concern is over who Bucky wants to sleep with."

Even with her head tilted toward the ceiling, she could tell Natasha was watching her. "Steve."

"What?"

"James wants to sleep with Steve," Natasha explained, and that was precisely when Carol overbalanced and fell over.

"What do you mean, he wants to sleep with Steve?" she demanded in the locker room of the health club five minutes later, cold water dripping from her face. The instructor had sent them both out: Carol for falling over like a demented caribou with an inner-ear problem (all splayed limbs and sputtering), and Natasha for laughing at her. She tugged the band out of her hair and shook it out before sticking her face back under the tap, aware that Natasha was looming behind her, hands on her hips. When she came up for air, she turned on her friend. "This whole time that Steve's been pouting his way through all your flirt-fests—"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "I do not flirt with James."

"—Barnes has wanted to climb into *his* pants?" She leveled a finger at Natasha. "And don't give me that. You flirt with him like the next three items on your to-do list are all Bucky Barnes. I just figured you didn't screw friends."

"I don't."

"Except for whoever you *are* screwing," Carol pointed out, and leaned down to splash more water on her face. God, she hated hot yoga sometimes. Then, she flicked off the taps and dried her face on her still-damp tank-top. At least it was as much water as sweat, now. "Rogers is an idiot," she decided.

"No worse than James," Natasha pointed out, leaning her hip against the next sink over. "Since he's figured out that being out isn't actually an excuse—"

"What, did the Barton-Coulson grabass Olympics not give that away?" Carol tossed in.

"—he's just sat and waited."

"Like a teenager who doesn't know how to ask the class hottie to prom," Carol agreed with a nod. They started over toward their lockers. "Rogers almost had a coronary when I called him out on the whole thing." She shook her head. "Apparently my 'ask him for coffee, you're hot and he's not blind' pep talk was lost on him."

Natasha nodded for a moment as they dragged out their bags and started stripping out of their yoga clothes. "James won't make the first move," she said after a few minutes, dropping her sodden tank into her gym bag. "And if Steve keeps dragging his feet, he'll give up."

"And Steve won't do anything until he's sure Bucky's interested." Carol twisted her hair up and secured it with an elastic band. "At least, I assume. I've never seen him make a move on anyone."

"You went on a few dates."

"Dates." Carol made sure to include the finger quotes. "We went out to dinner twice. I thought I'd have to scale him like Mount Everest to get a goodnight handshake." She reached for her t-shirt, then paused. "But I think this is different."

"Why?" Natasha asked, tugging on her jeans.

"Because in the whole time he's worked with us, I've never seen him crush so hard and long on somebody." Carol shrugged. "I mean, Stark noticed. And if Stark noticed—"

"It's like somebody's set up neon signs," Natasha finished.

"Exactly." Carol slid into a fresh pair of sweatpants—no use putting on jeans just to go home, shower, and sleep—and then looked over to Natasha. "We need to fix this," she decided.

"How?"

"I don't know how. But you're an evil mastermind and I'm a bully—"

"True," Natasha agreed, and Carol did flip her off this time.

"—and we can probably con them into it." She tied the drawstring on her sweats and let her hands fall to her hips. "I'm not above threats."

"I've threatened to tell Steve a dozen times," Natasha replied. Carol wasn't sure how she managed

to look perfect after thirty minutes of hell, but she always did; her hair was damp, maybe, but she mostly looked glowy and healthy. "James keeps either steering me away or calling my bluff."

"Sure," Carol returned, waving a hand, "but that's one-on-one. I'm talking *two* against one."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "You have a plan?"

"I have several."

They grinned at each other before gathering up their bags and heading out into the parking lot. Carol would forever deny how good the cool air felt on her sweat-sticky skin. She opened her trunk and tossed her gym bag in before looking back at Natasha. "Just for the record," she commented, "I know you're getting laid, and sooner or later, I'll bully you into telling me who the culprit is."

Natasha laughed from inside her own car. "Good luck with that," she called, and waved before driving away.

Bucky walked into Xavier's and squinted as his eyes adjusted from the rare October sunshine to the dark environment of the dive bar. The payday happy hour was larger in size than normal thanks to Darcy organizing a memorial service for the coffee machine to take place at the same time. Rumor had it certain principals had slipped the office manager a twenty each to provide for the first round of pitchers.

Once everyone had a glass of something in hand, Clint stood up on one of the barstools. Phil, unsurprisingly at his side, rested one hand on the back of his husband's calf. Clint looked down at him. "You know I'm going to be able to balance pretty easily up here, right?"

"I do," Phil answered with a smug grin.

Clint rolled his eyes. "Oh, but I'm the handsy one? Sure."

"Quit flirting!" Tony yelled from across the room.

"Alright, fine," Clint continued, raising his voice over the music and TVs of the bar. He held up his glass, and the other teachers followed suit. "Dearest coffee machine, we thank you for the days you've gotten us through and wish you the happiest of afterlives in small appliance heaven. To the coffee machine!"

The noise of cheers and clinking glasses filled the bar. Bucky felt a hand come to rest on his elbow and looked over to see Natasha at his side.

"C'mon, we've got a table over here," she told him before dragging him by the arm behind her, nails digging into his skin.

Bucky's eyes followed their path, and he felt his feet grow heavy. The table in question was a four-top and half of it was already occupied by Carol and Steve. "What are you doing?" he hissed through his smile when he realized Steve was looking over at him.

"Helping you get laid. You can thank me later."

Bucky sighed as he took a seat between Carol and Steve, Natasha walking around the table to sit opposite him.

"Barnes," Carol greeted with a nod and a dangerous smile.

"Hello, Carol," he said back while trying to fight off the nerves he felt building in his stomach. Bucky'd heard stories over the years about Natasha's friends that she worked with, and Carol always sounded like an intimidating woman. He was not fully prepared for just how intimidating she could be, and he had a dreading sense that he was about to get schooled on the matter.

"Hey, Bucky," Steve greeted.

Bucky returned the other man's grin for a moment before they both broke eye contact and took a swig from their glasses. Bucky was pretty sure he caught Natasha rolling her eyes in his peripheral vision.

"So, Barnes," Carol started, "Nat here tells me that you were in the Army. On Halloween, we get to wear costumes. I'll wear my old BDUs if you will."

"You were in the Army?" Bucky asked.

"No, please—Air Force. And you did not just seriously roll your eyes at me."

Bucky raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "Yeah, I'm sure it was really hard for you spending all day sitting inside of a plane."

"I probably outrank your ass," she threatened. "Don't make me order you to do pushups on this disgusting floor for the next hour."

"You should do it anyway," Natasha encouraged.

Carol grinned. "I should. Let Steve watch what it's like to be in the military since he didn't get to join."

Bucky turned and gave the other man a surprised look. "Seriously? You couldn't enlist? You look like you could be the posterboy for the military."

Steve ducked his head with a small grin for a second before answering. "I didn't have medical clearance." He opened his mouth to explain further, but thought better of it and took another drink instead.

"Well," Carol drawled, "Steve, you've already pumped me for all my military stories. Maybe you should try pumping Bucky and see what you can squeeze out of him."

The look Steve shot her was quick and murderous, but it quickly faded to a polite but barely-there smile. Bucky caught Natasha biting her bottom lip to keep from grinning too hard at Carol's word choice.

Bucky stood from his stool. "Next pitcher's on me. Nat, why don't you come with me to make sure I order the right thing?"

She elegantly rose from her seat and sashayed next to him all the way to the bar. "What the hell are you two doing?" Bucky asked once they were out of earshot.

"Steve wants in your pants," she answered.

He let that sink in a moment while Natasha ordered a pitcher for the table. "What? Since when?"

"Since you felt the same way about him apparently, but you two are both are too scared to do

something about it."

"How do you know?" he asked while sneaking a look around her back to the table to catch Steve picking at the nachos Carol had ordered for them to share.

"Steve told Carol, Carol told me."

He rolled his eyes. "Have we become our students? Are we playing telephone during recess now?"

Natasha smacked him in the chest. "Do you want a chance at Mister Tall, Blond, and Perfect or not? Steve hasn't done anything because he thought the two of us were together."

"Gross."

"I know, right? But since we are definitely not having sex—"

"*We* are not," Bucky pointed out, "but I would still like to find out who you're banging."

"—you should make it obvious that you're interested and ask him out already," Natasha said, flat out ignoring his comment.

The bartender set the pitcher of beer down in front of him, and Bucky threw some cash down on the bar. "You're sure?" he asked quietly.

"James, when have I ever lied to you or led you astray?"

"The bar is going to close before I finish answering that question, and that will only include the times I was sober enough to remember the ways in which you've wronged me."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Man up, James. Don't make Carol and I kidnap the two of you and lock you in someone's basement tied to each other until you finally come to your senses."

"You're terrifying. You know that, right? Because you say that like you've already rented the van needed to haul our unconscious bodies around."

The next two hours passed by quickly in pleasant conversation. Eventually the staff members began trickling their way out of the bar and on home for the weekend. Once the four of them had their tabs settled and made their way out to the parking lot, Natasha guided Carol to walk ahead of the two men. Bucky heard them begin to debate whether or not they needed to find a new place for hot yoga after this week's incident.

He slowed his pace a little and was pleased to see Steve match it. "So, um," he started as he scratched the back of his neck, "we still haven't gone out for that coffee."

"Oh, we haven't, I guess. Is there a good time for you?" Steve asked.

"Tomorrow morning works for me."

Steve shook his head. "You live thirty minutes away. I don't want you to have to drive all the way over here on your day off."

"Steve," Bucky said, stopping in his tracks and lightly taking hold of the other man's elbow so he did the same. Bucky waited until Steve turned and looked at him. "I want to. It's not an inconvenience. It's something I want to do."

Steve's eyebrows rose, and half of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "Yeah?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah. How's ten o'clock sound?"

Steve nodded. "I'll see you then."

"Is it as bad as you thought?" Bucky asked as they sat down at a table.

"No, it's worse," Steve replied, and smiled when Bucky laughed.

Prime Roasts was run out of an old gas station and smelled like motor oil and coffee all mixed together. The music reminded Steve of something out of a safari documentary, no two pieces of furniture matched, and the baristas all wore their hair in dreadlocks. Steve stared at the menu for five minutes before ordering, all too aware that Bucky was watching his back and trying not to laugh.

Steve was pretty sure the baristas were trying not to laugh, too.

He'd spent ten minutes in his car waiting for Bucky to show up, feeling like an idiot the whole time. He'd worn a blue-checked shirt and khakis, looking more like he was headed to work than out for coffee, and he was pretty sure his hair would survive a tornado for all the gel he'd applied and reapplied. He knew he was trying too hard, but first impressions were kind of important.

Bucky showed up in jeans and a shirt with just a few too many buttons open, and Steve'd felt both better and worse at the same time.

The shop was pretty busy for a Saturday, so they crammed together at a tiny table in the back corner, one with mosaic tiling and a lot of dings from being knocked around. Steve caught himself wondering if he could find something like it for the house before Bucky knocked their knees together under the table. "Sorry," he said, but Steve got the impression he wasn't that sorry.

"I didn't expect it to be so popular," Steve commented, curling his hands around his mug. (The barista'd informed him testily that they didn't believe in paper cups.)

Bucky grinned. "Are you kidding? This is hipster heaven. Every art student in a ten-mile radius does the walk of shame right through those doors."

Steve bit down on his own smile. "And you'd know?"

"Hey, I still remember college. You could stand in any room on the west side of our dorm and watch them come wandering back from the upperclassman housing over by the art building."

"You're exaggerating."

"Maybe, but you'll never know." He shrugged, easy and casual, and Steve tried not to laugh.

"This'd be a pretty good place to segue into your experimental art student past," he added after a sip of coffee.

This time, Steve finally laughed, a little louder than he meant to. Bucky's grin softened around the corners, something warmer, and he avoided letting the warmth sink into his stomach. "I was pretty boring in college," he said. "I double-majored in studio art and art education. Sometimes, I'd just catch a quick nap on the couches in the art building foyer before going back down to the studio."

Bucky cringed. "Ouch."

"My back agrees with you." Steve grinned around his next swallow of coffee. "I never really

embraced the whole college experience."

"You didn't miss much," Bucky assured him with a wave of his hand. "I dove right into the 'no parents, no rules' mentality freshman year, even with ROTC watching my back. Nat and I came up with this whole system: if I knew I was going out, I'd give her five bucks to bring me bad dining hall coffee in the morning, and she wouldn't tell me what stupid shit I did the night before."

Steve laughed. "How well'd the system worked?"

"She never held up the 'wouldn't tell me' part of the bargain."

The warm way Bucky said it, along with the smile, made Steve's own grin start to slip. He watched as Bucky sipped his coffee across the table and then as he glanced out the window, momentarily distracted by some teenagers shrieking into a cell phone outside. For a moment, Steve wondered whether his worry about clothes and hair was stupid, and if Bucky and Natasha were still—

Well. Whatever they were on their way to becoming.

When Bucky glanced back in his direction, he forced himself to keep smiling. "You and Natasha are really close," he observed.

Bucky shrugged. "Yeah, I mean— Yeah, there's no denying it, is there?" He turned his mug in his grip for a few seconds. "Before I met her, I wasn't a big believer in the whole 'found family' thing. But we sort of ran into each other at the right time, you know?" He glanced up from his coffee and met Steve's eyes. "She doesn't have a lot of people who have her back, I'm from the kind of family where 'stranger danger' isn't really a thing we worried about, and we sort of clicked." He smirked briefly. "I think I spent two-thirds of our college benders promising I'd marry her if I ever turned straight."

Steve nearly choked on his next sip of coffee, and the hot liquid burned the back of his tongue. He coughed as discreetly as he could, fully aware that his ears were burning bright red.

Bucky frowned at him. "There's no way that was weird," he said after a beat. Steve hastily put down his coffee and cleared his throat. "Barton's practically a pride parade, and—"

He paused after the "and," frowning slightly. Steve waited for a second or two, but when the other man didn't immediately pick up the dropped line, he shook his head. "Not weird," he promised, scratching the back of his neck. He couldn't quite meet Bucky's eyes. "I, uh, I'm just trying to imagine admitting that in college without being slugged."

Bucky's frown deepened. "By *Nat*?"

"No!" Steve squeaked. The embarrassment crept up his neck in the form of a blush, and he dropped his eyes to his mug. "By people. I wasn't—" He shook his head again. "I didn't have a great time in school," he said after a few more seconds. "I met a lot of bullies. Even in the first year or so of college."

When the silence between them got to be too much, Steve looked up to find Bucky staring at him. His expression was slack and blank, like Steve'd just started speaking in Latin or tongues. "You," Bucky repeated.

"Yeah."

"And bullies?"

"Yeah."

"When you have all that?" Bucky gestured vaguely up and down Steve's body with a flapping hand, and Steve knew that he was losing his valiant battle against his blush. He forced an embarrassed smile, feeling suddenly inconspicuous. "With the arms?" Bucky pressed when he didn't answer. "And the shoulders? And the broad—"

"Those are new," Steve interrupted. Bucky dropped his hand back to the table. Steven wondered if he could hide under it, because he felt his heart thrumming from the line of compliments. "I used to be pretty scrawny."

Bucky's jaw actually dropped. "No."

He nodded. "Peter Parker scrawny," he promised.

"See, now I know you're shitting me," Bucky accused. He pointed a finger across the table, and Steve raised his hands in defeat. "Because even if you weren't right off the cover of *Men's Health*—"

"And you only read it for the articles?" Steve asked.

Bucky broke his commentary to laugh. He shook his head. "I don't believe you," he decided, and went right back to his coffee.

"I promise, it's the truth," Steve replied. A tiny part of him wanted to posture and present himself as more together than he really used to be, but he figured he'd gone too far for that. He cupped his hands around his mug. "Bullies liked an easy target," he said after a few more seconds, "and a sick, scrawny kid fits the description." He shrugged. "I really didn't grow into 'all that' until college."

Grinning at his finger quotes, Bucky shook his head. "Well, if we'd gone to school together," he decided after a few seconds, "I would've kicked their asses for screwing with you."

Steve smiled slightly. His grip tightened on his mug, and he was suddenly aware of how closely Bucky was watching him. Even when he lifted his own coffee to drink, Bucky's eyes tracked him, and Steve felt as though he'd just been shoved under a microscope's lens.

He shifted a little and wet his lips. "And if they'd screwed with me for admitting the kinds of things you admitted to Natasha?" he asked carefully.

Bucky paused, his mug halfway to his mouth. "Still would've done some ass-kicking," he said after a beat, "but I would've probably asked for your number after."

Bucky's mouth quirked into the smallest of grins, then, and Steve lost himself to his smile and his too-warm face. "That would've been the fastest way to scare me off."

"Yeah, but I'm persistent," Bucky insisted, and Steve was pretty sure the next knee-knock was actually on purpose.

When they finished their coffee and stepped out into the October cool and optimistic sun, Steve glanced over to catch Bucky grinning at him. "So," he commented, their shoulders almost brushing as they crossed the parking lot. "You survived."

Steve chuckled. "By the skin of my teeth, maybe."

"You wanna do it again sometime?"

He punctuated it by pressing their shoulders together for a split-second, and Steve felt his mouth go dry. Bucky stopped and looked over, and for the first time in their whole morning, Steve discovered he didn't know what to say. They'd talked about sports, about teaching horror stories, about favorite movies (*The Wizard of Oz* had come up again), and Steve'd never once felt nervous or out-of-place.

Now, he couldn't come up with anything to say.

Bucky noticed almost immediately, because he shrugged at the silence. "We don't have to," he said, shoving his hands into his back pockets. "I mean, P.R.'s pretty hardcore, we could—"

"I'd love to," Steve blurted.

Bucky stopped in the middle of the sentence, his lips still parted, and Steve watched as the corner of his mouth quirked up into a little grin. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Steve admitted. He felt the rush of red creeping back up his neck, but he didn't try to rub it away this time. "Or, if driving all the way out here for coffee's a little much—"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Again?"

"—we could try lunch." Steve swallowed. "Or dinner."

He wondered what exactly the protocol was on first-date kisses when you weren't sure it was originally a *date*, because the way Bucky's mouth curled into a smile was maddening to the point of unbearable. Steve felt his fingers itch to touch, and he curled them into loose fists. It'd been a long time since he'd been on a date that wasn't forcibly arranged by one of his female coworkers (and *with* another of his female coworkers).

He liked the sort of shy, heady feeling. Especially when he got to watch Bucky wet his lips.

"Dinner," he decided, and Steve felt the nervousness in the pit of his belly uncurl. When he smiled, Bucky smiled back. "Definitely dinner."

"You say definitely, I'll hold you to it," Steve warned.

"You can hold me to anything," Bucky replied. He paused a beat after saying it, though, and Steve was sure that his cheekbones reddened. He dipped his head, huffed a laugh, and then reached out enough to touch Steve's upper arm.

Except it turned into a squeeze, too long for just friendly, and it took all of Steve's self-restraint not to reach forward and kiss him.

"I'll see you Monday," Bucky said after a minute longer, and then slowly released Steve's arm. "And we can start planning that dinner."

"I'll start planning it before that," Steve promised, and Bucky grinned as he walked over to his car.

They waved at each other one more time, and when Steve climbed into his car, he realized he was grinning like an idiot. He wanted to stand on the feeling at least until Bucky pulled out of the lot, but he knew it just wouldn't work.

So he didn't bother trying.

Happy Halloween

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we explore the escapades of Halloween at our favorite elementary school.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Tama_Abi for helping us out with Pepper's French.

"What about this one?"

Pepper looked up from the article she was reading to see Tony's hand sticking out of the walk-in closet with a skimpy, light blue, silk nighty. "And what would I be exactly?"

"We'll find you some wings and you can be a fairy."

"No," she replied, turning her attention back to the journal piece discussing symbolism in art produced by children.

"How about this?" Tony asked a moment later, again only his arm and an outfit sticking out for her to see.

"I'm not going to school as a naughty nurse."

"Aww, c'mon. I know it would instantly increase the feeling of well-being around—"

"No. Nothing that requires garter belts."

"But you know how much I love them."

"This is costume day at an elementary school, not your personal fantasy time."

He stuck his head around the edge of the door and said, "You'd be surprised how much common ground there is there."

"Seeing as how you come into my office to sexually harass me at the end of every day, I really don't think I would be."

"Fine," he sighed before stomping back into the depths of the closet. Pepper only managed to get two more paragraphs into her article before he offered another suggestion. "What about this one? No garter belts."

She looked up to see him holding a little red satin number. "Again, what would I be exactly?"

He shrugged. "We'll find you some horns and a pitchfork and you can be a devil."

"No."

"Aww, c'mon, Pep. Play along," he whined before going back into the closet to find a new suggestion. "What about your French maid costume? I heard Barnes complaining that his kids need help keeping their desks clean. And he won't ogle you because Nat swears he's gay—or at least that they're not banging, which I think you would have to be gay not to want to bang her—" He paused. "Of course, not that I want to bang her—"

"Sure you do."

"—when you're alive and vibrant and oh so smoking hot, but I'm just saying, God forbid something were to happen to you, I wouldn't mind carrying on my ginger streak. Once the appropriate time for mourning has passed and all."

"Tony, if you can actually get Natasha to agree to sleep with you, you have all the sex with her you want."

"You don't think I could? Sweetheart, I've never had a problem getting any woman—"

"Please stop talking."

"Fine. So French maid get up? Yes or no?"

"*Je ne porterai pas cela non plus*," she answered, grateful for the chance to use the French she relied on during her semester abroad in undergrad. "*Tu viendrais dans mon bureau et me demanderais de te dépoussiérer*."

"I would not ask you to feather dust me. I'd come up with a better pick-up line than that."

"I am actually trying to work here, you know," she responded, waving her article at him. "You should try it some time."

"Hey, I do plenty of work and reading of things to better myself. In fact, just this afternoon I did some research for the SpEd people about the reading and math software they're thinking about purchasing."

"So you can copy them?"

"So I can *leverage* them. I rebuild the computer program, tweaking to the SpEd team's liking, and sell it to the district for way cheaper than anything they could ever purchase licenses for. I'm being my genius, philanthropic, engineering self."

"You're rapidly approaching copyright infringement territory. You know that, right?"

He waved her off. "If I get arrested, I'll buy my way in to one of those cushy white collar prisons. I bet their conjugal visit rooms are super nice and not those ratty old trailers."

"I never want to hear about how you know what those trailers are like. Ever."

"It's not what you think," he replied before walking back into the closet.

"I'm not sure that makes things better," she muttered to herself.

A moment later, he walked out with a wide smile on his face and another outfit in his hand. She looked at the black leather and lace combination that was cut like a bathing suit. She raised her eyebrows at him, waiting for an explanation. "Put on those super-high-on-your-leg boots that I like

to unzip with my teeth and bam—you're Beyoncé. I could probably even make you one of those metal gloves tonight and have it ready for tomorrow."

"First of all," she said, giving up on her article and tossing it onto her nightstand, "I'm fairly certain your dentist wouldn't approve of you using your perfect teeth in such a manner."

"Whatever, you love it."

"Second of all, I'm not wearing anything that exposes the top half of my thigh. I will not only be fired for such a thing, but also lose my license."

"Why did you ask me to help you find a Halloween costume if you're going to reject all my ideas?"

"Tony, I never asked you to help me with this."

"Maybe not with your words—"

"In no way at all did I ask you to help me with this. I will figure it out for myself. What are you going to dress up as?"

He gave her his *you should know this already* look and answered, "I'm wearing the suit."

"No."

"Yes. I get one day a year where I get to wear the suit, I'm taking it."

She sighed and rolled her eyes as he went moved back into the closet to replace her Beyoncé get up. "I could be someone historical."

"Boring."

"I could call Phil and ask for a good character from a book."

"Lame," he shouted from inside the closet.

"I could be a painter."

His head stuck around the edge of the door and his wide grin was back. "You could be a painting. I think we still have some of that edible body paint around here somewhere."

"No, that gave me green breasts for days. Also, it would be inappropriate."

"Fine, but just so you know, I love your breasts no matter what color they are. They're just spectacular. My favorites, actually. They could be stained in orange and blue stripes and I would still—"

Pepper wondered how the long the pillow she threw at his face would shut him up. As she suspected, not that long.

Halloween was literally the best holiday to work in an elementary school. No, really.

Darcy thought about this as she played "Monster Mash" over the intercom for the fifth time in a row, the tinny chorus echoing down the hallway while the kids all rushed by. She loved seeing the costumes, even if all the Disney princesses (this year, the big ones were Merida and Rapunzel, naturally) and superheroes (Batman, Batman *everywhere*) got a little old. She usually could tell

which parents put in the effort, and which one's just dragged the kids to Target the night before their big Halloween extravaganza.

She was typing up an all-school e-mail in between her glances out the office windows, reminding everybody that she was bringing sangria to Tony's so they probably should pre-game the party with some incredibly fatty foods to soak up all the alcohol, when Carol burst in. She wore her camo gear and looked extra-badass—terrifying, really, if you paused to think how badass she normally looked. "I am going to use that CD for target practice at the shooting range if you don't turn that song off," she threatened.

She pointed a very angry finger in Darcy's direction. Darcy, for her part, leaned back in her chair. "It's Halloween."

"I don't care, that song is driving me insane and if you don't fu—"

"Miss Lewis!" a little voice announced, and Darcy grinned as Diego popped into the office. He was a first-grader this year, all messy-haired and round-cheeked, and even though he didn't really hold a candle to her favorite kids (the Odinsons-and-daughter), he came pretty close. Before Carol could change "fuck" to "fudge" and save her dignity, he did a little twirl in his pirate costume. "Look!"

Darcy beamed at him. "Holy cow, you look like a million bucks!" she announced. She knew that Carol was staring, because Carol did this weird fish-face thing when you caught her off-guard, sometimes. She dug her camera out of her blazer pocket. "Hold on, I'm so snapping a picture. Just—perfect!"

She showed it to him, he grinned and laughed, and then she sort of shoved him back out the door. He joined up with some kids who'd just come in from the busses, and Darcy found herself facing the steely-eyed *attention* of Carol Danvers. "What?" she asked, straightening her fez.

"First, what the hell are you?"

Darcy rolled her eyes. She'd already answered that question for Natasha, Pepper, both Jessicas, Bucky (who was too hot to be so poorly educated), and Wanda. "I'm the Doctor," she answered.

"Doctor what? Since when is wearing a fez and a bowtie with a tweed blazer a costume?"

"Bowties are cool."

"Whatever," Carol huffed. She crossed her arms over her chest. "The song needs to go, I—"

"That's Henry's old costume, by the way," Darcy interrupted. She leaned down and pressed the "back" button on the ancient CD player so the song'd start over again.

"What?"

"Diego's mom works three shifts and still barely has two dimes to rub together, so I hooked her up with Jane—Odinson, well, Foster-Odinson but that's a lot of syllables—to snag him a costume. Because it's Halloween." She picked up her sonic screwdriver with a flourish and jabbed it in Carol's direction. "And you can't have a sucky Halloween."

"You make less than no sense," Carol accused.

"Halloween," Darcy repeated, and watched Carol shake her head as she walked out of the office.

But Carol didn't understand that Halloween was the best of all possible holidays. Darcy thought

about it all day as she wandered around school, running her usual errands first and then strapping on the official "school website and newsletter" camera they kept locked up in Jasper's office so she could snap pictures. On Halloween, you got to be anyone you wanted for a whole day. If you felt less-than-super, you could be Superman. If you felt less-than-pretty, you could be Cinderella. If you felt less-than-sonic, you could be the Doctor.

Darcy liked that. What that said about her, she wasn't sure.

Either way, she managed to get dozens of awesome pictures: *actual* doctor Dr. Banner in his lab gear presiding over a counting lesson for princesses, ninjas, pirates, and kings; Mets team captain Rogers in his baseball whites, saving a tiger from getting his tail coated in clay thanks to a trouble-making monkey; Harry Potter-Coulson arguing with a man in a hazmat suit outside the computer lab while a gaggle of fourth-graders all exchanged funny looks; Captain Danvers crouching next to a table as she helped a fairy finish a math assignment. She exchanged high-fives with some fifth graders as they moved from English to math—they knew who the Doctor was, they were as cool as bowties, and she told them so—helped a Hello Kitty reattach her bow, and steered a couple wandering pre-kindergarteners back toward the gym.

At lunch, when she stepped out of the office again to watch the chaos rush by, the Hell Twins ran up to her. She knew they had names—Clive and Kevin or something—but she just referred to them as the Hell Twins. Or the Little Shits. She knew how many kids they'd made cry over the years.

"Tell Keith my costume's better!" Little Shit the First said. He looked like a tiny Bruce-doppelganger, what with the kid-sized lab coat and the goggles and everything. The only difference is that he's wearing yellow rubber gloves like the ones you keep under the kitchen sink.

Little Shit the Second (Keith) at least looked kind of embarrassed. And like Frankenstein's monster, incidentally. "She doesn't have candy."

The first one turned on him. "Anna said she gives candy for good costumes."

"I think Anna was lying."

"If she was lying, I'll—"

"Oh, no, you won't," Darcy interrupted. Both twins jerked their heads up to stare at her. She was pretty sure Shit the First was supposed to be the not-really-evil Dr. Frankenstein. Matching costumes were a favorite of the Little Shit Twins. "I'm not giving out candy now, I'm giving it out after the assembly. And if *either* of you do anything to Anna," she threatened, pointing a finger at them, "you'll spend today *and* Monday after school with me, in the office, helping me fold newsletters."

The Shits looked at one another, then back at her. "Monday's actual Halloween," Little Shit the Second said quietly.

"Then I guess you'd better make good choices," Darcy replied, smiling.

She'd never seen them run off so fast. It felt pretty good.

Somebody not too far from her chuckled, and she looked over to see that Bucky was wearing—

Oh, okay.

Bucky Barnes was wearing his own camo gear. And that was fine except for the fact that it fit so well, it looked kind of painted on.

Which was why Darcy, after staring for a beat, asked, "Did you just have Steve paint the camo colors on your thighs?"

Bucky nearly choked on his soda. "What?" he squeaked.

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Please. You look like you've spent the last six months straight doing lunges. I'm surprised you haven't popped a seam in those things. They look painted-on."

The red color in Bucky's face started to retreat. Darcy wondered if it *just* came from the choking. "I eat more junk food than I used to."

"Pretty sure if I groped your leg, it wouldn't be flab I felt."

"Pretty sure at least one person's gonna have a problem with that," Clint commented nonchalantly as he passed by them. The tails of his ridiculous tuxedo with the purple piping bellowed behind him.

Bucky snorted. "What are you supposed to be, anyway?" he asked.

Darcy groaned. She knew that cue. It was the cue Clint waited for last year, when their Halloween party'd been on a Saturday night and Clint'd debuted this—*thing*.

(She still firmly believed he should've dressed as a tight-rope walker, spandex and all.)

"I am the ringmaster of Barton & Coulson, the second-to-third greatest show on Earth," Clint announced. He removed his hat, bowed in a flourish, the whole nine yards. Darcy resisted the urge to gag, but Bucky at least laughed like Clint intended. "Meanwhile," he said, straightening up, "you look like you walked off some Naughty Army website."

Bucky grinned. "Maybe I'm relying on distraction for the big show-down."

"Or maybe you're trying to get somebody else's attention," Clint commented.

Bucky choked on his soda again. "Why is that everyone's default?" he demanded.

"Why do you keep blushing when somebody mentions it?" Darcy retorted. Bucky shook his head and took another sip from his soda. "Are you banging someone on staff?"

"No."

"Not *yet*," Clint noted.

The hint of red climbed back onto Bucky's face and Darcy grinned. "First Steve with the coffee girl, and now you?"

"It's new," Bucky said after a couple seconds, shaking his head, "and I don't even know if what we went on *was* a date, I—"

"It's Jess Drew, isn't it?" Darcy's mental rolodex stopped on that as the most likely name, but when she snapped her attention over to Bucky, she found out that both he and Steve were staring at her. She frowned as Clint snorted a half-laugh. "What?" she asked. Clint's shoulders started to shake. "She's single. She's hot. You might as well get on that before someone else does. I don't see—"

She wanted to keep going, she really did, but Clint started laughing too hard to stop. Bucky shook his head and then said goodbye to them, extricating himself from the discussion. Literally two seconds later, he bumped shoulders with Steve as he came out of the lunch room, and the two of

them exchanged some sort of conversation while Clint just kept laughing hysterically.

"What?" she demanded when the ringmaster of Asshole & The Guy Who Inexplicably Married Him finally stopped long enough to wipe his eyes. "What's so funny?"

"You have so much to learn," Clint said, and he clapped her on the shoulder before he walked off.

As retaliation, she got some after-school pictures of the ringmaster molesting Harry Potter's neck behind the circulation desk.

But that was neither here nor there.

It took twenty minutes to pile everyone in the school into the gym and get them settled. School assemblies always gave Bucky an itch between his shoulder blades, causing him to squirm the entire time as if he were one of his students. Natasha caught his eye and quirked an eyebrow at him in a silent question to see if he was okay. He shook his head and tried not to fidget while standing at the end of the row of bleachers occupied by his class. Chaos was never something Bucky handled well. It was why he enjoyed his time in the military; for the most part, everything was scheduled down to the second and there was organization everywhere.

He saw Steve approaching him with a smile and not for the first time Bucky wanted to simultaneously praise and curse whoever designed pants for baseball players. After Darcy's comments in the office earlier, Bucky hoped he'd been half as distracting to Steve as the art teacher had been to him all day.

"An assembly instead of parties?" Bucky asked when Steve got within earshot. "I mean, it's not that I don't miss having to pick up toilet paper from the Who Can Make a Mummy the Fastest game, but, really?"

Steve shrugged, and Bucky tried not to notice how the pinstripes of his jersey moved with the motion. "Would you rather deal with kids hopped on sugar and a bunch of moms fighting over what games should be played? Or worse—Thor taking over as Classroom Dad and organizing the whole thing for your students."

"Probably not."

Steve shrugged again. "Fury likes to keep the dispersion of sugar to a minimum." He leaned in closer to Bucky. "Plus, we totally rig the costume contest so the kids whose parents couldn't afford spending thirty dollars on some store-bought get-up and showed some creativity can have something to brag about."

Bucky smiled and nodded. Jessica Drew had told him as much when they'd convened for a short grade-level meeting that afternoon during specials to pick a winner from second grade. They'd gone with Maria, a girl from his class, whose mother had used a series of empty Kleenex boxes, some paint, and duct tape in order to transform her into a walking Rubik's cube.

Fury quickly got everyone settled and began passing out awards for each grade level. There was the first grader dressed as Rosy the Riveter, a fourth grade boy who wore a giant box painted white with miscellaneous socks attached everywhere to be a washing machine, and the staff award went to Mrs. Parker for her black-on-black attire and eye patch to dress up as the principal himself. Tony yelled "Suck up!" while she claimed her reward (a Starbucks gift card while the kids got gift certificates to next month's book fair), but the volume of his insult was hampered by the fact that he was still wearing the face shield portion of his hazmat suit getup.

"And now," Fury continued into the microphone, "the moment all of you have been waiting for. Or at least the staff has been waiting for.

"In case you haven't noticed, we have a couple of teachers here who are former military. Now some of you know there are different parts of the armed forces—Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. We are very lucky to have Captain Danvers and Sergeant Barnes on staff. But see, they come from different branches. And you know how when we have penny wars and different grades try and be better than the other? Well, same thing happens in the military, and today we're going to have a little competition to see who's better.

"Representing the Air Force—Miss Danvers!" Carol jogged out to the floor with a wave and cheers from students, the fourth and fifth grades screaming the loudest. "And from the Army—Mister Barnes!"

Bucky heard Steve whisper "Good luck" before he jogged out to the center of the gym floor to meet up with Carol and Fury. The former extended her hand for a friendly handshake that quickly turned into a death grip and a predatory smile.

Fury announced that the rivalry would be settled (at least for this afternoon) by a dodgeball fight. Once the students settled, the quiet only lasted a few seconds because the principal announced the two teachers would get to pick their own teams. As soon as those words left Fury's mouth, every hand in the gym went up into the air and screams of "Pick me! Pick me!" rang out from every seat in the bleachers. The noise was transformed into a collective whine when Fury informed them that only staff members would be playing.

Bucky made a sweeping motion with his right hand at Carol signifying that she would get first pick. Unsurprisingly, that went to Natasha. When Bucky called Steve's name, Natasha rolled her eyes and Carol covered her mouth with her hand so those looking at her wouldn't see she was making kissy sounds. Her next pick was for Jessica Drew, while Bucky called Barton down from the stands. Carol selected Wanda, the fourth grade teacher she collaborated with for half of the day. For shits and giggles, Bucky picked Coulson and ignored Natasha muttering a comment about him making a couples-only team under her breath. Carol's final pick was Pepper, who naturally received a wolf whistle from Tony. Bucky looked around, eyes settling on one figure in particular, and with a shrug he picked Sitwell.

"Sucking up before he comes to observe you teach next week?" Carol asked.

"I don't need to suck up—I'm awesome," Bucky answered.

"We'll see about that."

Before things could get started, Natasha ordered everyone to take their shoes off. "I'm not letting you scuff up my gym floor with your combat boots." They also removed any parts of their various costumes that might be a hindrance to their movements like capes for Wanda (or whatever her entirely red ensemble was supposed to be), Clint losing his ringmaster's coat, and Nat removing her sword and clinking chain necklace for part of her pirate getup.

Fury, borrowing one of Natasha whistles, declared himself judge and official. Darcy, once again equipped with her bullhorn, began offering commentary on the whole thing. Bucky chuckled to himself as he listened to her self-censor her usual colorful replays and thoughts on the action.

Wanda was the first loss, taking a hit to the shins from Sitwell, who gave a little fist pump at his victory. But his joy was short-lived because a second later, Pepper got him in the shoulder. Bucky saw Jessica hurl a throw in Clint's direction. The ringmaster used the ball already in his grip to

deflect the attack to his right and directly into the hands of Phil. The second grade team lead turned to Fury for the ruling and argued that her throw wasn't directly caught, so she shouldn't be out; Fury disagreed.

The rest of the players managed to successfully dodge the rubber balls flung through the air for a few minutes until Carol and Natasha started teaming up and picking off the boys one by one. Phil was tagged out just seconds after managing to clip Pepper on the arm. Clint went out a minute later, muttering half-formed curses under his breath the entire walk off the floor.

As the four remaining players paused a moment to catch their breaths and eye each other from their respective halves of the courts, Bucky wondered which was more difficult: trying to take out Natasha and Carol in a game of dodgeball or being forced to endure their matchmaking attempts at payday happy hour.

Bucky looked over to Steve, who raised eyebrows at him, his expression asking who their target should be. "Let's get Blondie," Bucky answered, causing Steve to grin. Simultaneously, they hurled balls in Carol's direction, Bucky aiming high while Steve went for her legs. She somehow managed to elude both of them in a spin move that ended her with throwing a ball at Steve that hit him in the back of the foot.

Some part of Bucky's brain wanted to make a comparison at the irony of a man who looked like a Greek god would be taken out with a hit to the Achilles' heel.

Steve shot him a mournful look over his shoulder as he walked off the court. Bucky took his time gathering what balls he could grab from his half of the court to set at his feet. Natasha, possessor of the lone ball on the women's side of the gym, tried to nail him in the ass as he bent over to grab one of the rubber balls, but he caught the movement in time to lean out of the way.

Once he had his ammunition ready, he stood there with a ball tucked under each arm and resting on his hips. He could feel the sweat running down his forehead already and starting to soak the back of his shirt, the weight of his dogtags resting on his chest as he sucked in air. Carol had some hair slipping out of the braid she wore; short, frazzled pieces framed her face in some chaotic halo. She gave him a Cheshire cat grin as she caught him eyeing her. Natasha looked somewhere between determined and bored, arms loose at her side.

Bucky heard Darcy yelling at him to make his move, and a moment later, he did. Keeping his eyes on Carol, he hurled two quick shots at Natasha's legs hoping she wouldn't catch his feint—which of course she did. She sidestepped both shots and quickly retrieved the balls, tossing one to Carol. Before Bucky could even pick up another round to target his opponents, the women had their arms reared back and ready to launch. He tried his best to sidestep the oncoming onslaught, but the wood floor and his socks conspired against him and his feet went flying out from under him. He hit the ground with a groan a split second before Carol and Natasha's attacks hit him in the stomach and head respectively.

He stayed down while the crowd either cheered or groaned at Carol being victorious and remained there until Natasha walked across the floor to stand over him. She stared down at him for a second with her hands on her hips and shook her head. "When are you going to learn that you can't beat us?" she asked.

"Apparently never."

She grinned and extended a hand down to help him up. "If you chase me down to give me another sweaty hug, I will harm you in a manner that will make your dating life even more non-existent than it currently is."

"Yeah, sure," Clint said, waving his glass, "but I bet *my* patronus is shaped like your—"

"God, Barton, I know this is an adult party suitable for adult topics but let's all go ahead and spare Steve's virgin ears."

Tony punctuated his statement by polishing off the last of his enormous glass of water, and Steve rolled his eyes. Tony and Pepper's house was decorated to the nines for the event, complete with orange string lights circling the enormous spread of food, various paper bats and ghosts hanging from the ceiling, streamers decorating the doors, and a burbling, smoking cauldron of something that involved dry ice. Steve remained uncertain about what actually caused the cauldron to bubble like that, but then, Tony and Bruce's evil mad-scientist laughter convinced him no one really *needed* to know.

The teachers were spread out throughout the open plan of the house, milling near the snack tables, the beverages, or here, ten feet from where Tony'd set up an apple-bobbing station. "You can trade the apple in for an alcoholic beverage of your choice," Tony'd explained when Steve'd arrived, full of hand flourishes that crinkled his hazmat suit. "Or, if you're a wise man who decided that booze can be replaced with *boobs*—"

Steve'd raised an eyebrow, and Tony'd paused.

"Okay, maybe not your area of expertise," he'd decided after a moment. "Anyway, trade the apple or eat the apple, is my point."

"Are drinks contingent on the apples?" Bruce'd asked from behind Steve's shoulder. "Not," he'd added once Tony looked momentarily scandalized, "that I intend to drink anything stronger than a Diet Coke."

"That stuff'll dissolve a t-bone steak," Tony'd sneered.

"*Mythbusters* disagrees," Bruce'd pointed out.

The conversation'd derailed at that point, turning into some weird discussion about the scientific method and proper testing protocols, and Steve had helped himself to a cup of Darcy's sangria without first bobbing for an apple. He'd ended up in a conversation with Clint and Phil, discussing the authenticity of Phil's Harry Potter costume, when Tony returned.

And the rest, as they say, was history.

"Are you still spreading that rumor?" Steve asked once Tony was done rattling the ice cubes in his glass around. He, Bruce, and Natasha were the only people not drinking Darcy's sangria. Natasha herself was drinking her own vodka punch, a drink so strong it could burn your taste buds off. At least, that was Bucky's claim, and Bruce'd nearly turned green from *sniffing* it.

"Rumors aren't rumors if they're true," Tony challenged.

"You really think I'm a virgin?" Steve retorted.

Clint cleared his throat. "You know my husband, who routinely stares at your ass, can hear this conversation, right?"

Phil sighed. "I don't stare at Steve's ass," he said. It wasn't so much defensive as it was long-suffering.

"Honey." Clint and Phil weren't the type of people to use pet names, Steve knew, and the sarcastic derision that dripped from Clint's voice proved that. "We've noticed. *Everybody's* noticed."

"You're kind of transparent," Tony agreed.

Phil rolled his eyes. "I assure you—" he started, but Steve raised a hand.

"It's okay," he promised, even though he felt the tips of his ears going red. Phil loved Clint, Clint loved Phil, and if Steve'd noticed the librarian eying the shape of his shoulders in the past, he could at least keep it to himself. "I'm more interested in Tony's hare-brained theory, anyway."

"Not a theory," Tony returned. He gestured up and down the length of Steve's body. "You wear cardigan sweaters that're practically hand-knit by Mama Rogers. You stink of truth, justice, and the American way. You have baseball whites that've actually managed to stay *white*." Steve sighed at that one. "Of course you're a virgin."

"He makes such a compelling argument," Phil intoned, and Clint snickered.

"Listen, I know you don't believe me, so— Bruce!" Tony reached out and caught Bruce by his lab coat. Before the other man could complain, he was reeled into Tony's grip, and an arm ended up around his shoulders. Bruce preemptively rolled his eyes. "Brother in science and sobriety—"

"What does he want?" Bruce asked the rest of them.

Tony's expression blossomed into one of deep hurt, and he clutched his free hand—the one holding his glass, rather than the one holding onto Bruce—to his chest. "I will pretend not to be wounded by that statement and ask: do you think that Steven Eleanor—"

"Really?" Steve asked.

"—Rogers has ever known the touch of another?"

Clint burst out laughing at that, and Phil, an ally in suffering through Tony's ridiculousness, at least bothered to roll his eyes. Bruce shook his head. "I think," he answered, glancing over at Tony, "that you'll lose out on the touch of your wife if you keep embarrassing him."

Tony blinked. "Why's that?" he asked, and Bruce tilted his head in Pepper's direction.

She stood next to the food table, still wearing her witch's costume from that day, although she'd traded the long black skirt for something a little shorter. And added boots. Steve wondered what she and Tony'd *really* spent the two hours between school and the start of the party doing. Either way, she gestured with little flutters of her hands while in the middle of a conversation with—

Oh.

With Bucky.

Bucky, still in his camo gear, his hair mussed up from the assembly and his head tilted back as he laughed. Pepper squeezed his arm, he shook his head, and Steve tried not to let his stomach wrap itself into knots. They'd talked briefly about scheduling a time for dinner, and Steve—

He certainly wasn't a virgin, but he'd spent the majority of his youth sickly and skinny, and the majority of his adult life trying to figure out what to do now that he wasn't sickly and skinny anymore.

Dating never really climbed very far up that ladder.

He watched for a couple more seconds before something impacted the back of his shoulder. When he turned around, it was in time to watch Tony smack him again. "Ow?"

"Oh, please, you're basically one giant pectoral muscle and no, Banner, I don't want you to correct my anatomy." Bruce grinned while Tony sent Steve an annoyed look. "Go talk to him."

"I—"

"I'm not drunk enough to repeat our previous conversation," Phil interrupted.

"He's not," Clint echoed, and Steve couldn't help smiling.

"Wait, what previous conversation?" Tony demanded. He turned on Clint and Phil, letting Bruce escape his clutches. Bruce and Steve exchanged a smile before Bruce went over to join Carol, Natasha, and a few others near the drink table. "You had a previous conversation about his failed attempts to bone the new guy and you didn't invite me?"

"I don't think I'd call it that," Phil deadpanned.

"No, listen, we need to talk about what a 'united front' means, Coulson, because I don't think—"

Steve knew intellectually that Tony continued talking, but he didn't try to strain to hear as he moved away from the group. He finished his drink, put the cup down on the edge of the sofa table, and crossed the room to where Pepper and Bucky were standing. Pepper lightly touched Bucky's arm and smiled, Bucky smiled back, and Steve was glad it was Pepper and not anyone else.

It was hard to feel irrational jealous at someone as kind as Pepper.

"We were just talking about you," Pepper greeted as he walked up, and Steve smiled a little. Shyly, he thought, but Bucky's own smile was wide and warm.

"Hopefully not repeating any of Tony's rumors," Steve joked.

Pepper sighed and rolled her eyes. "The one where you're a government guinea pig because no mortal man could look like you?"

"No," Steve corrected, feeling his ears redden again, "the other one."

"The— *Tony*." And without another word, Pepper left the conversation to stalk after Tony—who was still, unsurprisingly, bickering with Phil and Clint.

"I wonder sometimes if those two are work spouses to make up for the fact they each have real spouses," Bucky commented, sipping his drink.

Steve glanced over. "Pepper and—"

"Not Pepper. Tony. And Phil." Steve made it less than a full second before he laughed. Bucky grinned at him, but then the conversation fell into a moment of silence. Steve wanted to summon up some kind of conversation, but he couldn't find anything.

At least, not until Bucky bumped their shoulders together lightly and said, "Pepper was giving me restaurant advice."

"Because?"

"Because aside from your government experiment rumor—and I agree, by the way—word on the gossip mill is that we're looking at a second date here soon, and Pepper knows *alot* of people who run restaurants."

Steve wished suddenly he hadn't abandoned his cup. He looked at the floor for a second, then flicked his gaze back in Bucky's direction. "And you convinced Pepper the rumor was a lie?"

"No, I encouraged it." Steve snorted a laugh and tried to ignore the fact he felt flushed and giddy, like a teenager. He was a grown man, not a sixteen-year-old. "I left out the part where I agreed to cook for you, though. I didn't want to put too much fuel on the fire."

"I'm starting to think you're chickening out, though, talking about restaurants and still not setting a date."

Something flared in Bucky's eyes. "Is that so?"

Steve shrugged and tried to keep his tiny grin at bay. "Maybe."

"Because the last time someone accused me of being chicken, she eviscerated me on a ten-mile foot race and I pulled a muscle in my groin."

Bucky delivered it with such a straight face that Steve couldn't help but laugh. Bucky grinned at him, tipped his glass in his direction, and then finished off the last few swallows of sangria.

"Natasha plays dirty," he noted while Steve was still laughing.

"I promise not to make you pull a groin muscle."

"See, *you* would be worth it."

Their eyes met just then, and Steve tried to ignore the twist that happened lower than his stomach. He cleared his throat, but all it really did was make Bucky's little smile grow. "Tony's probably recording this conversation," he said after another half-second.

Bucky snorted. "Tony probably has a bet going on how long it takes me to goose you in those baseball pants." Steve rolled his eyes and forced himself to shake his head. "They should be illegal."

"I heard that Darcy asked whether I'd painted your camos on."

"My god, it's like we work in the middle of a clique of freshman girls. They're going to start passing us notes folded up into little triangles—"

"Written in a secret language," Steve added.

"Right!" Bucky snapped his fingers and grinned. "And orchestrating situations so we can slow dance together at the sock hop, because if we do it, then, I don't know, Darcy will get to dance with Peter and—"

"I would dance with Fury, full-body contact and everything, if I could see you two dance together." Darcy's fez was crooked as she popped almost out of nowhere, armed with a giant bowl of pudding cake (the kind disguised to look like a cat box with droppings) in one hand and a glass of Natasha's death-punch in the other. "New Hottie and Unobtainable Hottie drifting slowly closer thanks to the love that dare not speak its name?" She let out a slow whistle. "I'd ship it if you weren't both parts of canon pairings."

Bucky glanced over to Steve. "She's speaking English, right?"

Darcy scoffed. "I mean because you both have girlfriends."

"We do?" Bucky asked.

"Since when?" Steve added.

"Please." She put down her bowl of pudding for the express purpose of waving her hand at them. Steve was pretty sure she was not on her first glass of vodka punch. "You," she accused, pointing at Steve, "have the coffee date girl. And you, New Hottie, have Jessica Drew."

"You're dating Jessica Drew?" Steve asked, trying to stand on his grin.

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest. "You took some bimbo out for coffee?"

Steve officially lost his battle with his grin. "I'm changing your name in my phone to 'Some Bimbo,'" he decided.

Bucky knocked their shoulders together and leaned there for a beat too long. "Whatever you say, Jessica."

There was a very long, very silent second between the three of them where Steve grinned like an idiot, Bucky grinned like a bigger idiot, and Darcy stared. She stared, open-mouthed and gaping, and kept staring when Bucky elbowed Steve lightly. "I'm going to get a refill," he said, gesturing with his cup. "And by the way: next Friday night."

Steve felt his grin soften. "Really?"

"Can't have you thinking I'm a chicken," Bucky replied, and then wandered off.

Darcy, meanwhile, still stared.

"You— But—" She closed her mouth, swallowed, and then opened it again. "Okay, this just isn't *fair*," she decided.

Steve frowned. "What isn't—"

"Old Hottie. New Hottie. *You* Hottie. And then there's 'I'd do it in a pinch'—"

"I'll assume that's Phil," Steve put in, shaking his head.

"—and I just—" She jabbed her index finger into his chest. "You've ruined all my dreams," she decided.

"Because you, Clint, Bucky, me—" Steve paused to frown a little at the way the list was shaping up. "—and Phil were all going to— What, exactly?"

"Do not ruin this with logic!" Darcy snapped. "You're driving me into the arms of Bruce, here!"

Steve laughed. "Well, if it doesn't work out with Bucky," he said, raising his hands, "you can maybe reevaluate the situation."

"Are you kidding?" Darcy hung her head. "You're Mister Perfect, and he's into you. You're going to end up in a house with a picket fence and two-point-one children. The straight women of the world are doomed."

Date Night

Chapter Summary

It's date for all our lovely couples.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not getting this updated last week, but we have a good excuse. The amazing the_wordbutler was graduating from law school. So make sure to congratulate her on that incredible feat.

We should be back to our usual biweekly update schedule now.

"I always told you not to set them on the counter when you're cooking, James," the voice on the other end of the phone line chided, and Bucky considered beating his head against the wall.

His kitchen was warm and full of scent almost immediately after school on Friday, thanks to his big plans. Big plans including homemade lasagna (including the pasta—look, the route to a man's heart was actually through his stomach, all right?), a massive salad, some wine, and Steve Rogers.

He was most excited about that last one.

And less excited about—

"You're the one who wrote it in fancy ink, Ma," he reminded his mother as he sprinkled a bit more seasoning into the ricotta. A quick dip of his finger into the mix and then a taste-test revealed that it was perfect. Natasha would kill him when she found out he worked this hard.

"And you're the one who spilled water on your recipe card."

"I'm asking for what temperature to set the oven at, not for the nuclear codes."

"Some of those recipes were handed down from your grandmother. Back in the old country. How would she feel about you ruining her legacy?"

Bucky wiped his hand off on a towel and reached to drape pasta along the bottom of the pan. "Ma, Grandma was born in Newark."

His mother huffed. "I never said she specifically was from the old country," she retorted, and Bucky chuckled a little. He cradled the phone between his shoulder and the side of his face as he reached for the bowl of sauce. Unfortunately, his mother picked that exact moment to ask, "Are you cooking for a man?"

Bucky nearly dropped the phone into the baking pan. "*Ma.*"

"Just an innocent question, James."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "If you need to know," he replied, "I'm cooking for a friend."

"Just a friend."

"Yes."

"You realize that your mother knows the difference, yes?" Bucky bit back a grumble as he started layering on the sauce and then the cheese. "I've only known you your entire life, never mind the fact that—"

"Ma?"

"Yes, James?"

"I will google the damn oven setting if you don't knock it off."

Bucky was all the way onto the next layer of pasta before his mother spoke again. "You wouldn't dare," she warned.

"Try me," he challenged, and made it all the way to the ricotta before they both started laughing.

In the end, she turned over the setting, and not a moment too soon. Bucky hated a lot of aspects about his apartment—the distance from school, the horrible water pressure in the shower, the way the laundry room always smelled like stale, wet clothes—but he could never hate his kitchen. No, his kitchen was the reason he'd rented the place: plenty of counter space, a side that was clearly meant to be a breakfast bar, and new appliances. He knew that his mother's plan to acquire grandkids by teaching her children to cook well was a gimmick, but Bucky loved it.

You needed a decent kitchen to churn out his kinds of meals.

A glance at the clock revealed that Steve'd be there within about a half-hour, so Bucky finished up the lasagna, shoved it into the oven, and hopped into the unreliable shower. The blast of cold water woke him up, and he sloughed off the school day before the water ever really warmed up. The kids'd been especially wound up, probably from the full moon, and Bucky'd practically dashed for the parking lot once they were gone.

And no, his date wasn't the only reason for that, thank you.

He was still dragging on fresh clothes when a knock sounded on the door. He grabbed his sweater off the corner of the bed and walked out into the living room just like that: jeans, white undershirt, no socks, damp hair. It was probably a little mean, but he wanted Steve to *get* it.

Since this was their second date, after all.

Steve's charming smile faltered as soon as Bucky opened the door, and Bucky grinned as he watched the other man's eyes cycle through a distracted once-over. "Sorry," he apologized without sounding sorry. "I hopped into the shower and didn't finish changing."

"That's okay," Steve managed. Bucky waved him into the living room. "I can wait, if you need to—dress."

"I'm good," Bucky promised. He closed the door and tugged his sweater over his head, aware that Steve was standing close enough to watch every stretch and movement. His fingers gripped the plastic container he was carrying until it crackled, and—

"You brought pie?" Bucky asked.

Steve lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I promised to bring dessert."

"I expected the usual cop-out. Cookies, cupcakes, whatever you could grab at Wal-Mart." He started toward the kitchen. "Wine?"

"Sure," Steve answered, following. "And I thought about cookies, but I figured if you were cooking, the least I could do was bring something decent."

"The Safeway sale special?"

"No, it's from a bakery I like." There was something soft in Steve's voice, and Bucky stopped fishing around for a corkscrew to glance over his shoulder at him. "A friend of my mom's runs it," he explained as he settled on one of the stools at the breakfast bar. "She was around a lot when I was a kid, so I like to go there. Support her business."

"And lemme guess," Bucky replied, grinning. "You get special orders and discounts."

Steve tried to look casual, but Bucky caught the spark in his eye. "Natasha gave up your love of peach pie," he said, and the only saving grace was that Bucky's groan was covered up by the cork popping.

He poured their drinks and then came around to sit next to Steve. If their knees bumped, he could claim it was an accident. "You pumped Nat for my favorite dessert," he double-checked, "and then got it from an actual bakery."

"I can't cook, I don't know anything about wine or beer, and Tony's suggestion was—inappropriate."

"Body chocolate and adult movies?" Bucky guessed.

"Painted pottery with particular logos." When Bucky peered at Steve for a moment, he snorted a little laugh and shook his head. "There's this place," he explained, "where you can paint mugs and plates with anything you want. Pepper's banned Tony from ever going again."

"Why?"

"Because he surprised her with soup in a bowl that said 'show me your tits' in the bottom."

Steve delivered the line so deadpan that Bucky very nearly spat his mouthful of wine all over the counter. He coughed and reached for the hand towel that was still lying on the counter while Steve broke out laughing. Once he recovered, he shot Steve a dirty look. "You're a fraud," he accused.

The innocent Mister Rogers face rebounded within seconds. "How?"

"You act like you're this cardigan-wearing all-American boy," Bucky explained, "as clean-cut as apple pie and all that." He gestured up and down the length of Steve—he wore his sweater from school but had changed into jeans that hugged every inch of his thighs and ass—and watched the tips of his ears go pink. "But deep down, you're as depraved as Stark."

Steve's lips dropped open. "I'm not as bad as Tony."

"You are completely as bad as Tony," Bucky stressed. When he leaned a little closer, his knee pressed up against Steve's. Steve shifted until their legs were even closer, Bucky's nearly slipping

between his where they were sitting on the stools. "Watch. A couple dates from now, you'll take me pottery-painting and surprise me with a sexy spoon rest."

Steve grinned. "What will I paint on it?"

"You tell me."

He watched as Steve worried his lips into a thoughtful line, but he didn't miss the way Steve's eyes wandered, either. They traced Bucky's face, dipped twice to his mouth, and Bucky felt his chest tighten when Steve put down his wine glass.

At least, until the oven timer beeped to alert them the lasagna was ready. Bucky resisted his urge to groan as Steve sat up a little straighter. He rubbed a hand along the side of his neck while Bucky jumped up from his seat.

"We're coming back to that conversation later," he promised, and he swore Steve blushed again.

Steve spent the entire eating portion of their dinner making appreciative little noises in the back of his throat and complimenting Bucky on his cooking. They meandered through conversations about food while they ate, discussing favorite restaurants that they'd have to take one another to in the future, favorite foods, and the inevitable argument over the worst school lunch imaginable.

"Those tacos last week were pretty bad," Bucky reminded Steve as they cleared the table—both of them, because Steve refused to sit still. "I think Darcy was right about that not being meat."

"It was supposed to be meat?" Steve asked, and Bucky laughed and knocked their hips lightly together as he wandered past.

Bucky piled dishes in the sink while Steve wrapped up the remainder of the lasagna. The kitchen was small enough that they knocked elbows or stepped into one another's personal space a few times, but it never felt weird.

Mostly, it made Bucky want to kiss Steve, but he thought better of it every time. Steve looked a little nervous, nervous enough that Bucky wondered how often he dated.

As though anyone dated less often than Bucky.

"So there I am, nine years old, about to get my ass kicked," Bucky said another half-hour after dinner, setting his pie plate down on the coffee table and reaching for his coffee. Steve was sitting next to him, his pie already gone and his coffee cup cradled lightly in his hands. Those hands could drive a guy to distraction. "And we're all out on the playground, pretty much the whole school, and I'm waiting for it. Because you piss off the meanest fifth-grader in the school, you're going to get pounded, right?"

Steve laughed. "Right."

"And I'm standing there—little as hell, glasses, the whole bit—when who steps right behind me and this asshole but my sister Tammy." Steve laughed again, harder this time, and Bucky elbowed him in the side. "Yuk it up, sure, I got saved by my sister, but it's because of her that I'm even sitting here right now." He raised his coffee cup, took a swig, and then set it back down on the table. "Because not only was she a year older than me, but she played some serious competitive softball. And the second Sam swung at me, she was on him like Pooh Bear on honey."

Steve froze in the middle of setting his own mug down. "Pooh on honey?" he repeated.

"Shut up, I teach the second grade," Bucky reminded him, and Steve's grin lit up the room. "Anyway, point is, Tammy Barnes is the only reason I'm around to cook for you, because Sam would've beaten me into the ground."

Steve's grin wavered slightly as he straightened back up. "I guess I should thank your sister, then."

"Don't say that too loud. I think my ma has this place bugged. The second she knows a guy wants to meet my family, she'll show up on the doorstep and ask you how you feel about babies."

"We better hide your sexy spoon rest, then," Steve replied, and Bucky laughed.

"Okay, come on," Bucky cajoled once they were finished. He knocked their knees together. "I told you my secret shame, it's back to you now." And even though Steve laughed, their legs stayed close, pressed up against one another as Steve jumped into a story involving a college house party he never meant to go to.

The conversation eventually started to meander until, finally, the coffee was gone and neither of them could eat another piece of pie. "Keep it," Steve said as he collected his coat from one of the hooks inside the door. "I can always get more."

"Why else do you think I'm keeping you around?" Bucky asked, and Steve grinned at him. He watched the other teacher put on his coat for a few extra seconds before he said, "Listen, I had a good time. We should keep doing this."

Steve raised his head and met Bucky's eyes. They were only a short distance apart from one another in the entryway. He waited only a beat before he said, "We should."

"At least until you tell me what you're painting on my spoon rest," Bucky joked, but his own voice sounded far away.

The corner of Steve's mouth lifted in a tiny smile. "I'm still thinking about it," he admitted. They stood there for a moment longer, each staring the other one down, before Steve swallowed silently. "I've got a few ideas, though."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Bucky reached for the doorknob then, ready to let Steve out and wish him goodnight, but as soon as he was leaning into Steve's personal space, he discovered that they were kissing. It was soft and coffee-scented, the sort of kiss that qualified as sweet more than sexy. Bucky wasn't sure which one of them started it, but it didn't keep him from abandoning the doorknob to press his hand against Steve's arm and to grip the leather of his jacket. Steve's own hand found his side, fingers spreading almost possessively.

Bucky couldn't help but sigh at that—the strength of Steve's hand against his side, the strength of Steve's arm in his own grip—and for one, brief, maddening moment, the kiss moved from coffee-scented to coffee-flavored.

When they moved apart for air, Steve's face was flushed and his lips parted like he'd just broken the surface of the water after a dive. Bucky felt his own blood rushing, and not entirely to his face.

"We should definitely keep doing this," Bucky said breathlessly, and Steve chuckled.

"Yeah," he agreed again, and let his fingers trail down Bucky's side before they officially wished

each other a good night.

Clint plopped onto the couch with a weary sigh. He waited for Birdie to stop glaring at him for disturbing her nap and to readjust herself to between his and Phil's thighs before he pulled a stack of papers into his lap and uncapped his trusty purple pen for grading.

He listened to the sounds of Corey and Chumlee haggling with a customer over the price of a set of baseball cards as he started in on making his way through the pile of grading in his lap. Getting it done now meant it wasn't hanging over his head all weekend. He could enter grades late tonight, have all day Saturday and most of Sunday free from thoughts of school, and spend Sunday evening fine-tuning his lesson plan for Monday. It was how his non-payday Friday evenings went.

Twenty minutes later, Phil clicked off the television. Clint's eyes shot up from the spelling test he was correcting. "Did you just voluntarily turn off a Pawn Stars marathon?"

"Yes," Phil replied.

"Who are you and what have you done with my husband?"

"When did we become the boring, old married couple who stays at home on a Friday night?"

"Always. We've always done this. Granted some of us are older than others in the room, but..." Clint answered. And he didn't mind that this was their tradition. Work was hard, sanity was rare, and Clint's childhood had been pretty devoid of normalcy and comfyness growing up. He was thrilled to attain it in his adult life.

"Not tonight," Phil announced. "I've got new plans. Go change your clothes."

"That was so close to being the perfect sentence."

A half-hour later, Phil was driving them in an unfamiliar direction. "Where are we going?" Clint asked.

Phil shrugged. "Don't know." Clint side-eyed him for that response. "Stop giving me your 'my husband is becoming a senile old man' look. I know what I'm doing."

"You just said you didn't know where we're going."

"Doesn't mean I don't have a plan."

Clint pursed his lips and looked at the passing scenery on the country road they were driving down. He should be excited, he knew, to be out and doing something new and fun with Phil. But he was also no longer wearing his sweatpants. Clint liked his sweatpants; they were broken-in, fuzzy, and soft. Just like his couch. They had a great couch.

"Stop whining."

"I wasn't whining," Clint shot back.

"Not out loud."

Clint rolled his eyes in response. He hated when his students did it to him, but the car was dark, and Phil's eyes were on the road.

"I saw that."

"Whatever," Clint muttered.

A swing band's song worth of silence passed between the two of them before Phil quietly said, "If you want to go home—"

"No, no, it's fine." He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "It's just been a long week. I'm ready for Thanksgiving break."

"You mean you're ready for my mom's cooking."

"Always ready for that. But the four-day weekend is also more than welcome. Are we taking anyone with us this year?"

"I'll start asking around. God knows Mom's been on my ass about it for a few weeks now."

They lapsed back into silence until Phil apparently decided they'd reached their destination and pulled into the gravel parking lot of a roadside diner. "You been here before?" Clint asked as they climbed out of the car.

Phil walked around the side of the vehicle before answering, "Nope."

"You do remember we already had dinner?"

"Maybe I'm in the mood for some dessert," Phil told him.

Clint felt his blood start heading south at the words and tone of voice his husband had used. "We could've just stayed at home for that."

"We're out of ice cream."

Clint smirked and closed what little distance was between them. "I can think of some other things I'd rather taste."

"I'm in the mood for chocolate."

"We could call Jessica; see if she's cool with sharing Luke. Nah, they say once you go black—"

"You worried about something?" Phil asked his eyes dancing.

Clint shrugged. "No, of course not. I mean, unless I should be worried something."

"You're fine," Phil reassured him.

"Fine? Only fine? I wasn't aware you had such a mediocre opinion of my... equipment."

Phil's shoulders sagged. "You're not going to let this go, are you? It was a joke, Clint."

He gave his husband a hard look that let Phil know he thought there might be some truth based in the humor.

Phil placed his hands on Clint's hips and pulled him against him. "I have zero complaints about you—at least in that area. You could do a better job picking up your dirty laundry, but that? Fantastic." He paused to press a kiss against Clint's lips and gave an evil grin when he pulled away. "I mean, you're not as big as me, but—"

"God, Phil, some of us are show-ers, not growers," he whined as he pulled away and walked to the

diner's entrance. "Let's just get you your damn ice cream so we can go home."

Clint fell into the nearest booth and did his best to control his facial expression. He always had to work at it not to scare his students, and right now he didn't want to broadcast the extent of his pissyness.

He loved Phil, honestly more than he ever thought he could. But Clint just wanted to be home right now. He was tired, they were in the middle of nowhere, and then that whole discussion—which on any other day Clint would've been joking about it with ease and zero self-confidence issues. But the Hill twins had been on a terror this week, Jessica's hormones and morning sickness were a beast to deal with from across the hall, and once Friday night hit Clint was more than ready to be done with his week.

The waitress, a woman in her forties with bright red lipstick and a nametag that read LeAnn, asked for their orders.

"He wants a brownie sundae," Clint said while pointing at Phil, "and since it's November, is there any chance you have pumpkin pie?"

She nodded and smiled. "How much whipped cream do you want?"

"Cover the thing."

"And if we could get it to go," Phil added, but Clint shook his head.

"Nope. We're eating here," he said to his husband, before turning to the waitress and repeating the statement.

"Okay," she drew out, "anything to drink?"

"Water for both of us," Phil answered. He waited until she turned to make her way back to the counter before leaning across the table. "We really don't have to—"

"No, Phil, it's fine. I'm just tired and being an ass." He gently kicked at Phil's ankle under the table. "Sorry."

Phil shrugged his reply.

"You're right," Clint continued. "We should get out more often, just the two of us. Next weekend, we could do that pottery painting thing again if you want. Steve has some coupons for it, I think."

"Are you going to paint me a mug I can actually use at school?"

"I never said you couldn't use that one at work."

"It says 'Finest Ass in All the Land.'"

Clint shrugged. "It's not like it's untrue."

Phil ever-so-slightly lost his battle to keep a straight face, and Clint watched the corners of the other man's mouth twitch as their waitress sat their desserts down in front of them.

Simultaneously, they both pushed their dishes to form a row in the center of the table. "Don't get pumpkin pie in my ice cream," Phil warned.

"Only as long as you keep your nuts to yourself," Clint answered before wagging his eyebrows.

"For now, anyway."

"I need an enormous gin and tonic," Jessica said as she collapsed onto a bar stool. "And you can go easy on the tonic."

Next to her, Carol snorted and raised her beer bottle in mock-salute. "That bad?" she asked.

"Says the one of us who got stood up."

"That's not an answer."

"That's because the answer's pretty obvious," Jessica replied, and tipped her head toward the bartender before taking a healthy swig of her drink.

The bartender smiled indulgently, but then again the bartender'd spent the last three years getting used to Jessica's eccentricities. Plus, he knew Carol's favorite beer off the top of his head and'd already popped the bottle top when Carol'd walked in, so bonus points to him.

Of course, that was two beers ago.

Carol watched as Jessica set down her glass and reached over the bar to steal an extra lime from the little bowl. "What happened?"

"No," Jessica replied. She pointed her lime at Carol. "We're not doing this. We *always* do it, and we're not doing it tonight."

"Doing what?"

"The thing where you have a fucked-up night that I never hear about because you get me tripping through the tulips into my fucked-up night." She dropped the lime into her drink. "I am not waking up tomorrow with a hangover *and* no idea what this asshole did to you."

Carol rolled her eyes. "I got stood up," she reminded her friend, because that'd been the entire body of the text message she'd sent half an hour earlier. "He said he'd show, he pulled an asshole move and didn't, the end."

"Which guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh my god, you are worse than my kids the first time we play Twenty Questions." Jessica moved her glass to her other side so she could raise her hands and, very carefully, punctuate every word with a gesture. "Which. Of the guys. Who you are pretending not to check out on Match-dot-com. Stood you up. Tonight?"

"I'm not on Match," Carol said.

"Yeah, browser history on your iPad argues otherwise." When Carol whipped her head around, it was just in time to catch Jessica's casual shrug. "You let me borrow it," she commented, then sipped her drink.

"To use the GPS."

"I got extra-lost."

"Yeah, where?"

"Does it matter?" Jessica set her glass down and crossed her legs. She wore killer heels with jeggings. How a man'd voluntarily fucked up a chance to spend time with those thighs, Carol didn't know. "The point is: a Match boy just gave you the big middle finger, and I want to know which one before I make my suggestion."

Carol sighed. "Which suggestion?"

"You know which suggestion."

"You sure about that?" Jessica raised her eyebrows in response. Carol shook her head. "I am not hooking up with Stark's friend."

"Because you're doing so well with internet dating," Jessica retorted. At least she had the courtesy to raise her hands at Carol's evil glare. "Hey, hey, pot calling the kettle black, I know it," she admitted. "Look how my date turned out."

"How *did* your date turn out?" Carol asked.

"But I'm just saying, hot fly-boy Stark knows from his misguided whatever-he-was years might trump 'Bulldog6969' from the web."

Carol rolled her eyes as Jessica helped herself to another couple swallows of her drink, but somehow still ended up staring at her beer. "It's so fucking stupid," she finally said, her fingernail picking at the label. "We chatted for three weeks straight. And not that limp-wristed one-message-a-week bullshit where you figure at the end of it he might fall through. Every night for three weeks, and then he can't even send me a pleasantly-worded fuck-you e-mail when he drops me like a hot coal."

"You think he's got a girlfriend?" Jessica asked. Carol glanced over to watch Jessica poke the lime with her drink's swizzle stick. "I mean, there's something in the water about guys with girlfriends tonight. Think it's possible?"

"Something in the—" When the pieces clicked together in Carol's head, she felt herself scowl. "You are fucking kidding me."

"You're right, I've been trying the macabre humor lately, think it's working out?" Jessica raised her glass in what looked to be a toast, then paused and just downed three swallows of the thing. She set it back on the bar with a thud. "He got up to piss and his phone started blowing up."

Carol resisted the urge to groan. "You looked at his *phone*?" she demanded.

"Six text messages in eight seconds, Carol! Even you would look at his phone!"

"You have the most fucked-up trust issues of any human being on earth, I *swear*—"

"Can we please talk about all my issues later and focus on his right now? Thank you, Doctor Phil." As sharp as Jessica's words were, Carol watched her expression soften as she dropped her eyes to her glass. "Yeah, okay? I shouldn't've looked. But I did."

She fell silent for a couple seconds, just stirring her drink. "And?"

"And she asked when he was coming home and whether he'd pick up some milk."

Carol grit her teeth in what she knew was an absolute grimace. "No chance it was a roommate?"

Jessica shot her an evil look. "'Pick up some milk, baby, we're out'?" she quoted.

"How do you remember that and not birthdays?"

"Easier to maintain a constant roster of all the people who've wronged me over the years. I call it my 'first against the wall' list." Jessica shook her head and downed another couple gulps of her drink. "Anyway. Asshole tried to deny it, I threw a plate of spaghetti at his head."

"Not the first time an Olive Garden's seen that from you," Carol recalled. When Jessica glanced over, she hazarded a grin. "Am I wrong?"

"Technically, it was a Tour of Italy."

"Can human arms even lift those platters?"

"It's all that Tae-Bo, baby. And when I finally convince you to break off that threesome you're having with Natasha and hot yoga—"

Carol pulled a face. "I've seen her half-naked and sweaty, it's not the Greek goddess thing you'd expect."

"—you'll come over to the dark side." She tipped her glass against Carol's beer bottle with the familiar glassy *chink*. "It's my turn, right?"

Carol considered for a moment. "Right," she agreed, even though she was ninety-five percent sure it wasn't.

"Okay then." Jessica cleared her throat and then, very certainly, raised her glass. When Carol didn't lift her beer immediately, Jessica cleared her throat *again*. Carol rolled her eyes, but did as expected. "To Bulldog6969 and he who shall henceforth be known solely as Asswipe the Third—"

"Fitting," Carol decided.

Jessica shot her a look for interrupting. "To the Bulldog and the Bullshit," she amended. "You may have taken an evening of our time, but you've not taken our youth, our joy, or our barely-there, shriveled-up honor."

"Charming."

"And so, it is with not at all even the least bit of regret that we say, and I quote: Fuck the hell out of you."

Carol had to admit to grinning at that. They clicked their drinks together and then, as tradition demanded, downed the last gulps like they were the last boozy mouthfuls on earth.

After the bartender came over with replacements—this time with two limes for Jessica—Jessica glanced over at Carol. "You know, we could always take a lesson from half the guys we work with and go straight-up gay for one another."

Carol almost choked on a mouthful of beer. "Oh, Jessica," she said, sounding a lot like Ororo in one of her rare motherly moments, "you couldn't handle me if you tried."

Jessica laughed. "It's because of that tantric yoga shit," she retorted, and bad night or not, Carol laughed along with her.

The art gallery was crowded. Pepper figured it would be. The featured artist had been popular for years with his minimalistic paintings, and while his art had fallen off in the last decade, it was still better than most of his contemporaries.

Tony had surprised her with the hour-long drive from the suburbs into the city after requesting she put on something tight with the sexiest heels she could find. Since this was something he requested of her at least three evenings a week, she didn't take him seriously; at least not until she saw him changing into a silk suit. She'd then gone into her closet and chosen a backless deep blue dress with a pair of nude heels that weren't quite as tall as the ones she normally wore to school so that Tony could be slightly taller than her for the evening.

Even after being with Tony for the better part of three years, she still wasn't accustomed to some of the things he saw as normal: the always new and speedy car, the fancy parties, the ridiculously expensive clothes. To be fair, she still enjoyed all of these things, even if she felt out of place among them.

But art was where Pepper was the one who knew everything and everyone. Tony knew a surprising amount, reluctantly admitting that his mother had taught him a thing or two on the matter before she died. But even his knowledge was usually put to shame by his wife—which he was fine with. She knew he enjoyed listening to her talk her way through a gallery about styles, colors, and themes. It took her a while to realize that he wasn't just happy to learn new facts—something he did constantly—but that he was just happy to be around her.

She tried to remember that whenever they had a night on the town. It was easy to lose focus on the good parts like that when every time they went out into the city, Tony bumped into at least two ex-girlfriends. Or ex-one-night-stands. Whichever title you wanted to use. They were already up to three, and they'd only been at the gallery for twenty minutes.

With each one that walked up to Tony asking if he remembered her—he didn't—Pepper saw his jaw tighten and felt the increased pressure through the hand that rested on her lower back. She normally encouraged him not to be so brusque and rude, but around these bimbos she allowed it.

He'd just about worked himself back into a faintly pleasant mood when a voice shouted, "Anthony!" from across the room.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," Tony muttered under his breath.

Pepper watched as a man in a suit and glasses approached with a fake grin plastered on his face. "Anthony, what are you doing here?"

"Hammer," Tony greeted as he shook the other man's extended hand solely for the benefit of putting on a good face.

"And this must be the famous Missus Stark," the stranger said, turning his attention towards Pepper.

Tony swatted away the hand this Hammer person was holding out for Pepper to shake. "No touching. And she prefers Potts."

"Oh, got yourself a real ball-buster, huh?" he asked Tony before leaning into Pepper's personal space and overwhelming her nose with his too-strong aftershave. She'd heard stories, only a few, from Tony about his previous life being a technological genius and business mogul (granted he was still one of the two). But she'd only heard the name Hammer twice. "Any chance that in that

whirlwind wedding everyone gossips about, you caught him without a pre-nup? Because really why else would you tie yourself down to this guy? Kidding!" he chuckled, although Pepper was pretty sure the last word was a lie. Despite knowing little about the man and his ties to her husband, she instantly understood Tony's disdain.

"What do you want?" Tony ground out between clinched teeth, keeping a tight smile on his face for the camera clicking around them.

"Me? Oh, I'm just here to admire the art," Hammer answered before pointing toward a busty and scantily-clad blonde off at the bar. "Greta likes the art, too. Later tonight, I'm going to show her some strokes with my own brush, if you know what I mean." He elbowed Tony to drive the point home.

"Yeah, got that," Tony replied, eyes flickering around at the people surrounding them.

Pepper felt disgusted by the whole thing, and desperately wished her dress had a back. She also regretted not wearing taller stilettos after half-listening to Tony's numerous lectures about how much force she could bring on that tiny point and some other physics stuff that was not in her wheelhouse. She'd love to run a little science experiment right now with her heel and the man's skull.

Hammer took a sip from the tumbler in his hand before starting his new line of questioning. "Still doing that teaching thing? We all thought you'd be over that charity bit by now, but hey—I think you should stay there as long as you want, especially if it means I get to keep your government contracts."

"Surprised they still let you have those. From what I've heard, you haven't been able to produce anything worthwhile in the last few years," Tony snapped back

The man sputtered through some explanation about unintelligent programmers and a whole list of excuses that Pepper only half-understood. Even though she didn't quite follow the technobabble flowing from the other man's mouth, she did enjoy watching him squirm.

Tony nodded at him before grabbing her hand and leading her away. "Let's get out of here."

"We haven't even seen all the—"

"I'll buy every single piece in here if it means we get to leave right now. C'mon."

Pepper wordlessly followed him out of the gallery and to the car. Part of her wanted to press for more information about Tony's strained relationship with Hammer, but she recognized the tightness in his jaw and didn't want to push. She knew a few things about his past, mostly what everyone had learned from the news almost eight years ago, but she still had trouble feeling like it was her place to press for details about his past even after marrying him. Tony had a habit of playing personal things close to his chest, and when he was ready to share those details he would.

Expecting him to drive them right back home, Pepper was surprised when he parked outside a hole-in-the-wall pizza joint three blocks over. The tiny parlor had three tables, all empty and surrounded by mismatched chairs. The trio of men working the counter recognized Tony on sight; she wasn't sure if that was because of his stint in the press years ago or because he frequented the place. She'd recognized the logo from a number of times he'd brought pizza home for dinner.

They quickly dispensed a couple of slices each for Tony and Pepper, and the couple snagged one of the empty tables. "Sorry 'bout that," he offered around a mouthful of cheese pizza. "If I'd known

we'd been subject that level of douchery, I would've made different plans."

She shrugged. "It's fine."

"No it's not. He—that whole scene—it's just, I'm not that anymore." She reached over to rest her hand on top of his, but he took it in a strong grip. "I'm not him anymore."

"I know," she reassured him.

He nodded, but didn't say anything else until they got into the car. By then, he seemed to have shaken whatever ghosts he'd seen tonight off of him enough to at least sound like the Tony she knew and loved. The one who spent the entire drive home laying out in explicit detail exactly how he was going to get her out of her dress and what was to come after that.

"We should do this more— Thor!" Jane squeaked, and then laughed as Thor backed her against the side of their SUV and kissed her neck.

The garage felt private and cool, lit only by the yellow glow of the bulb in the overhead light and warmed only by the radiating heat of the SUV's engine. Thor's hands spread on her hips, pinning her in place as his beard rasped against her throat. She tipped her head back and scratched fingernails through his hair, knowing it'd only encourage him.

"We should at least—make sure the kids are asleep," she pointed out. Her breath caught when his teeth grazed against her pulse point.

"In a moment," he half-whispered, and raised his head to capture her mouth, instead.

Like most parents of small children, Jane and Thor rarely seized the opportunity to spend a night out together. Most of their evenings were spent wrangling the boys into the bath, picking up after Alva's art projects and flights of fancy, and helping with ridiculous second-grade homework. Jane tried sometimes to remember what it was like to be young and stupid, necking in the back of a rusted-out car not fit for family life, but it was always interrupted by another argument or finger-paint "incident."

That was why, in part, she'd been so delighted when Darcy'd offered to babysit and allow them an actual night to themselves. Delighted enough that she'd let Thor pick the movie and then suffered through a very long historical war film riddled with scientific inaccuracies and anachronisms.

They'd argued about the movie afterward, sharing coffee on a tiny loveseat at a local coffee shop and silently pretending they hadn't promised to relieve Darcy at 9:30 p.m. Jane knew she should check her watch—it'd been after ten when they even climbed into the car to head home—but Thor's hands were roaming under her sweater and—

"Remind me, we picked this truck because of the room in the back seat, did we not?" Thor breathed against her ear, and Jane smacked him in the shoulder as she pushed him off her. "What?" he demanded with a toothy grin. "Did we not?"

"Do you want to hook Alva's booster seat back up when we're done?" Jane retorted. Thor's booming laugh echoed through the garage as he swung her around. "That was a serious question!" she warned.

Her feet briefly left the ground as he hugged her. "Perhaps I'm just intoxicated to have a night *alone* with you."

"The night's not over just because we're home." When he opened his mouth to protest, she leveled him a look. "It's a lot more likely to be over if Darcy heard us pull in and comes out looking for us."

He considered this for a moment. "It would not be the first time," he finally reminded her.

Jane scowled. "You always bring it up."

"In all fairness, she said she would text before she came over, it is not *my* fault that—"

"Always bring it up!" Jane interrupted again, and Thor laughed just as warmly as a few seconds earlier.

He slid his hand around to the small of her back and kept it there as they walked into the house through the garage door, careful not to bang around too much. Their children were heavy sleepers, something they inherited from their father, but Jane didn't want to risk it when the warmth of Thor's palm was driving her to distraction. She lost her shoes and coat in the mudroom, set down her purse in the kitchen, and allowed him one opportunity to flatten her against the fridge and kiss her again before wandering into the living room.

She almost lost her battle with silence to giggles when she saw what waited for them on the couch.

The re-run of *16 and Pregnant* on the TV was set to a near deafening volume, not that either of the bodies sprawled out on the couch cushions noticed. Because curled up in a throw-blanket was Darcy Lewis, her glasses halfway off and her head tipped back in a snore, and sprawled across her lap was none other than their son, George. He was nuzzled up against the blanket and Darcy's leg like he belonged there, and for a moment, Jane couldn't help but feel an overwhelming pang of warmth from the two of them.

Darcy had started as their wacky neighbor with the slightly-overenthusiastic mother, but was now one of Jane's very best friends.

And George was edging into that too-independent age where he wanted to do everything—including badly tie his shoes—without the least amount of help. Cuddling was usually out of the question, especially with people other than his parents.

Thor stepped forward, presumably to wake them up, and Jane just shook her head. "Leave them," she murmured, pressing her fingers against his firm stomach.

"Darcy will be annoyed if she wakes up here at 2 a.m. with George still on her lap," her husband observed quietly.

"And George will never fall back asleep if we wake him up," Jane retorted.

He smiled gently and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen," he promised, and then stepped away. When he moved George, it was to gather the boy up into his arms as though he weighed absolutely nothing. Darcy stirred, grunted, and yawned, but George only smacked his lips.

By the time Thor was halfway up the stairs, Darcy was stretching her arms over her head. "You guys totally lied about the time," she challenged, straightening her glasses. "Unless it's daylight's savings and I didn't even know."

"We stopped for coffee," Jane replied as she switched off the TV.

"Coffee? God, is that what couples are calling it now? First the hotties have the big queer coffee date—"

"Are you even speaking English?"

"—now you two are probably having filthy backseat sex while I'm napping with your kid." Jane cast her eyes at the floor in lieu of an answer, and Darcy stared. "Oh my god. You do this every time I babysit, don't you? You get laid by your giant king of the hammers—and I mean that Captain Hammer style, where the hammer is his—"

"Darcy!" Jane half-snapped, half-squeaked.

"—and meanwhile, I'm keeping the kids in line and leaching free wifi." She poked Jane in the arm, and Jane rolled her eyes. "I'm onto you, Doctor Foster-Odinson."

"I'm going to withhold your payment of homemade fudge if you keep this up."

"No, you won't. Because if it's between my teasing and having your hubby 'lay his hammer down'—" Darcy paused to waggle her eyebrows. "—you'll choose the teasing. And really, have you seen your man-mountain? Who *wouldn't*?"

Ten minutes later, after Darcy was half-pushed out the front door—"Just keep your windows closed, you know they open toward my room," Darcy insisted—Jane climbed the steps up to bed. Alva snored lightly in her room, her feet on her pillow and her pony toys all in bed with her, and in their room, the boys slumbered soundly. When she walked into the master bedroom, it was just in time to watch Thor peel off his t-shirt and toss it into the hamper.

She stopped for a moment just to watch the line of his back. "Hi," she said finally.

He turned around to smile at her. "Hello," he greeted. By the time she'd pulled the door shut, he'd swept her literally off her feet and deposited her onto the bed.

The next morning, when Jane thought to check her phone while Thor helped dress the kids, the only text message was from Darcy.

windows closed = good. blinds open = bad

Jane smiled.

The knock on Natasha's door startled her out of her reverie. She was surprised to see how close the sun was to the horizon; seemed like she'd just gotten home from work and now the clock on the wall was edging toward six. The knock repeated itself, and Natasha rose from the corner of sofa she'd wedged herself into to answer it.

She wasn't really surprised to open the door and see him. "Hi," she greeted.

"Hey," he breathed. "Can I come in?" He tried to gesture with his hands, but each one was weighed down by a canvas bag laden with groceries.

Natasha nodded and stepped out of the way so he could follow the path to the kitchen. She watched him set the bags down on the counter, take off his winter coat and drape it on the back of one of the nearby dining room chairs, and toe off his shoes. He then moved around her kitchen, gathering a large, a knife, a cutting board, and bowls, his movements familiar with the layout. And they should've been. They'd taken turns cooking in each other's kitchens for years. Well, mostly him

cooking; she usually just observed or diced things.

She watched as he pulled ingredients out of the environmentally-friendly grocery bags: sausage, cubed ham, a variety of vegetables, beef broth, and half-empty bottles of spices he'd brought from his home. "You're cooking solyanka?" she asked, recognizing the makings of the Russian soup that used everything but the kitchen sink.

He nodded. "You looked like you wanted something from home when I saw you on bus duty." He looked up from where he was organizing his ingredients. "Is that okay? I can make something else with this."

She shook her head. "It's fine," she told him quietly. "What do you need me to do?"

They worked quietly for the next twenty minutes, where the only words spoken were by him telling her how much was needed of each item and how it should be chopped. Once everything was dumped into the pot he'd filled with water, she leaned her head over the stove and inhaled the smell of the spices and meats. She closed her eyes at the memories the scent evoked, images and noises from a life long ago in another country.

Natasha felt his hand come to rest on her lower back, and she turned into the touch. She leaned against him as their arms wrapped around each other's waists. "How did you know?" she asked.

"I overheard the Pre-K students talking about parachute day in P.E., but none of us heard you give your usual rants about how obnoxious it is to coordinate a bunch of five-year-olds into using the thing in the fifteen minutes you have for the class."

She huffed a small laugh into the place where his neck became his shoulder. "Am I that predictable?"

"When it comes to parachute day? Yes." He pulled away a bit so he could study her face. "Whose anniversary?"

"My mom's. How did you know?"

He gave her a hint of a sympathetic smile. "Because that's how my face looks every July twenty-seventh." She slipped from his grasp and hopped up to sit on the counter across from the stove. She was simultaneously pleased and slightly bereft at the ease with which he'd let her move away from him.

"You usually don't seem sad this time of year," he continued. "I mean, your first year, sure, but you were kind of sad all the time."

She turned her gaze to the floor and shrugged when he muttered an apology for the observation. Alex's plane had crashed seven weeks before her first day of full-time teaching. She'd had to spend the year after graduation as a sub until she landed her current position—she called it the Year from Hell. Little did she know what was in store for her once school let out for the summer. She'd been quiet and kept to herself as best as possible that first year, but her circle of friends—those who were at the school that far back—had broken their way in. Phil, with his calm and quiet strength; Clint, the idiot older brother; Tony, with his craziness and ego that he used to deflect people from seeing his kindness; and Bruce.

Bruce, who looked just as haunted as she did some days. Bruce, who stayed equally quiet about his past.

Bruce who was currently standing in her kitchen and cooking her soup to help ease her pain.

They never poked or prodded at each other's histories. They simply recognized the same emptiness in each other's eyes, like some built-in members-only jacket to a club full of grief. It was easy to recognize when memories were giving the other hell, because they knew the signs in their own lives. They did little favors for each other: bringing coffee, repeating a ridiculously stupid joke they'd overheard from their students, brushing shoulders just for a brief physical reminder that the other wasn't alone. But they always kept it to themselves, this part of their lives.

Well, she did anyway. She was pretty sure Stark knew about Bruce's past and the losses it held. But she didn't talk about hers in great detail, not even with James.

"Why is this year different?" Bruce asked.

For a moment, she watched her toes flex and curl as they dangled in the air before telling him, "This is the twentieth year." She caught his nod and the way his lips disappeared into a thin line in her peripheral vision. "I don't know why that makes it harder," she continued. "It's still the same difference in time between years eighteen and nineteen, but for some reason the big, round numbers just..."

"Yeah," he agreed. "You wanna, I don't know, talk about her or something?"

Natasha shook her head. There were only a few things she could remember clearly about her mother: the way her hands looked, the smell of her soap, the feel of her brushing Natasha's curls out of her face when she tucked her in at night. Natasha remembered how tightly her mother had clutched her hand when they arrived in America and made their way through the airport, not knowing the language around them and feeling completely lost. At least, she thought she remembered those things clearly. After all this time, it was hard to say for sure. She only had a few pictures of her mother in her possession, and those images she'd seared into her memory. But the rest had gone hazy over the years.

"Have you called your dad?" Bruce asked.

She gave a bitter chuckle. "So he can drunkenly slur at me how he lost the only person who ever mattered to him? No thanks."

Bruce checked his watch. "Soup won't be done for another ninety minutes at least. So I guess there's only one thing we can do right now." Her eyes rose to meet his, and the sparkle in them was almost enough to start lifting her spirits. "I'm going to have to kick your ass in Jeopardy."

She rolled her eyes. "Please, Banner."

"It's Doctor Banner, thank you very much. Now c'mon." He grabbed her right hand and led her back to the sofa before turning on the TV.

She reclaimed her position in the corner of the couch, and he sat down with a respectable distance between them. Natasha turned sideways and brought her feet up to nestle against the side of his right thigh.

"I know you own socks," he grouched despite hitching his leg up slightly so she could sneak her bare toes between his thigh and the cushion. His hand slipped inside the cuff of her yoga pants and he grabbed ahold of her leg, his thumb absentmindedly sweeping back and forth against her left calf.

The battled each other during the game show while taking turns mocking the arrogance of Alex Trebek. He easily took her on the science categories, but she held her own on the other questions.

Once the game show was over, Bruce turned the TV off and distracted her with stories from his classroom that week: tales of lost teeth, blaming younger siblings for accidents, and the latest events on Spongebob. Natasha did not understand how that cartoon was still a thing, but his quiet and rumbling voice helped soothe the ache that could never quite disappear on days like this.

A while later she sniffed the air, a familiar scent wafting from the kitchen. He stood and made his way to the stove, Natasha close on his heels. Bruce stirred the contents of the pot before nodding and deeming things ready. He reached in to remove the pouch of spices while she fished a ladle out of a nearby drawer and pulled a couple of bowls down from the cabinet. He dished out their dinner while she filled two glasses with water and set them at the round dining room table.

Her eyes fluttered shut at the first bite, transporting her back to her childhood. "Good?" Bruce asked, and she nodded her approval.

They ate in silence, quickly consuming their meal as all teachers were prone to do. Natasha offered him seconds, which he declined, so she grabbed both of their bowls to clear the table. He rose and followed her, packing up the spices he'd brought from his home and tidying things up.

"I could stay, if you want," he offered as she contemplated which Pyrex dishes she wanted to store leftover soup in. She looked over at him. "I mean, nothing has to happen," he continued. "But if you just want someone around..." His words dropped off as he shrugged.

Natasha studied him for a minute. There was no agenda, no hopes nor lust in his eyes. She knew what that last one looked like on him; it had been plainly written on his face the first night they'd hooked up four months ago on the evening of Jessica Cage's wedding. And she'd seen it on a few occasions since.

But tonight she knew he was just offering comfort, the kind that came from just having someone else around, no matter what you were doing or not doing together.

The thought was tempting, but she shook her head no; she'd do the rest of her grieving by herself. He nodded and finished packing up his stuff and putting his shoes and winter coat back on.

She walked him to door and placed a hand on his arm. Reaching up on her toes, she kissed the corner of his mouth. "Thank you for this," she whispered against his cheek.

The corner of his mouth curled up in a small grin. "Of course. You'll call me if you need anything, right?"

She nodded before opening the door and watching him step out into the chilled November air.

Canned Food Drive

Chapter Summary

The school rallies together to help raise canned goods to donate to their community.

There is also, of course, betting and discussion of relationships.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You know if you help your boyfriend win, he automatically loses, right?" Clint asked as he sorted the color-coded score sheets into piles by classroom teacher.

Steve sighed. "Is there anything you don't turn into a contest?"

Clint considered this for a moment. "Sex," he answered, "but I'm working on that."

Clint's classroom sometimes reminded Steve a little of a big top, full of color, life, and maybe just a hint of clutter. The kids had recently finished up a project where they made eight-page newspapers covering the events of their literature circle books, and all of the projects hung from clothes line in front of the window, available for casual browsing. Clint worked hard to ensure that he always showed off everyone's work, even when it didn't qualify as the cream of the crop.

Steve appreciated that, because he tried to do the same in the art classroom.

Steve was also bent over the yearly flyer for the canned food drive, proof-reading it for what felt like the thousandth time. When he'd arrived at the school years earlier, Clint'd run the drive entirely on his own. It'd been mostly out of necessity—Phil'd just picked up the Accelerated Reader mantle, and the book fair used to happen a week before the canned food drive, knocking him all the way out of the running—but he'd turned into a mad man trying to cover everything. That's really why Steve offered to help total up the winners that first year.

That, and Steve remembered the Thanksgivings when he and his mom'd relied on donations from the church for stuffing, green beans, and the other side dishes. He liked watching the kids light up when they put together that they were helping other people, including some that might just be down the hallway.

Plus, having his kids design "Happy Thanksgiving" cards to send off with the donations instead of the usual handprint turkeys helped his sanity.

"How're we looking?" Clint asked, and Steve dragged a hand through his hair.

"I'm never going to stop being convinced there's a typo in here we just can't see," he replied, and Clint grinned around the pen he'd stuck between his teeth. Post-it labels assigning piles of score sheets to the appropriate teacher were stuck haphazardly around his desk. "But the dates are right, so I think we're good."

"Perfect," the other man enthused, and made grabby-hands for the flyer. "Darcy's practicing her best Michael Buffer voice for tomorrow."

"Who?"

"Michael Buffer," Clint repeated. Steve frowned at him. "You know, WCW? 'Let's get ready to rumble?'" Steve shook his head. "Are you sure you have a dick?"

He rolled his eyes. "Because I don't know who Michael Buffet is?"

"Michael Buffer," Clint groaned, leaning forward to rest his head on his desk. "Oh my god, it's like you're not a real boy."

"Well, there's a rumor in the teacher's lounge that suggests James Barnes can confirm that."

Clint already burst out laughing by the time Steve turned to see Bruce Banner wandering into the classroom, his hands in his pockets and a tiny, half-pleased smile playing across his lips. He wore his usual tweedy pants and half-wrinkled button-down shirt, except—

"Is that fingerprint?" Clint demanded, pointing to the smears on Bruce's forearm and his rolled-up cuff.

Steve resisted the urge to groan. "Finger paint is like marijuana—"

"Who calls it 'marijuana'?" Clint demanded.

"—it opens up the door to every other messy craft in existence, never mind—"

"It wasn't one of mine," Bruce promised, holding up his hands. "Ellie Sinclair came in for a cool-down at the end of the day and found her artistic voice."

Ellie Sinclair was a fourth-grader on a behavioral IEP who hated every teacher and paraprofessional in the entire school—except for Bruce. Carol'd authorized Ellie to take cool-downs in the kindergarten room, provided she didn't interrupt Bruce's students and stuck to art projects and books.

And, apparently, smearing Bruce's forearm with paint.

"All up and down your arm?" Clint asked as Bruce came around and leaned against the corner of his desk. Bruce opened his mouth to reply, but Clint abruptly shook his head. "Never mind, I want to go back to how Barnes knows Steve's a real boy."

Steve rolled his eyes. "I thought personal lives weren't a competition."

"Sex isn't a competition," Clint corrected, "and only because I somehow married the one guy on the planet who isn't into that."

"Technically," Bruce noted, "Tony is the only guy on the planet who *is* into that."

Clint ignored him to point his pen at Steve. "So, did you bone?"

"I think that's sex," Steve pointed out.

"I think that's a denial," Clint retorted.

"And in the interests of peace-keeping," Bruce offered, spreading his hands in the world's most mollifying gesture, "I was joking. All I heard was that there was a dinner."

"You heard about that?" Steve asked. It actually sounded a little more like a demand than Steve

was entirely comfortable with. He wanted to at least keep the dinner dates with Bucky a little under the table until they felt more settled.

Or until Steve felt like he could touch Bucky without his heart taking flight out of his chest, either one.

"Wait, there was an actual date?" Clint chimed in.

Bruce raised his hands higher. "Rumor in the teacher's lounge," he replied, complete with a nervy little smile that suggested he knew more than he was telling. "Confirmed only by Steve's inelegant flailing."

Clint snorted hard enough that he grimaced in pain. Steve shook his head and reached for the list of preferred donations, just to proofread that as well. When no one said anything for several seconds, he admitted, "There was a dinner."

"And bo—"

"And dinner," Steve cut Clint off. The other man frowned in distaste. "What?"

"Has no one ever told you to grab life by the thighs and seize it?" Clint returned. Bruce's brow crinkled at the slightly-altered proverb, but the other man wasn't deterred. "Hot guy, looks good in a pair of army pants, wants to jump your bones. You spend too long dancing around him with dinners and flirting, he might not jump anything by the time you're done."

Bruce tilted his head slightly to one side. "Didn't you 'accidentally' brush up against Phil a few thousand times in the year between him transferring here and your first dinner?" he asked.

Clint paled slightly. "That's not—"

"And I think I heard a story about thigh-groping, now that we're on the topic . . ."

"Why are you even here?" Clint cut in, and Steve gave into the urge to laugh. Clint flipped him the bird before turning his annoyance back on Bruce. "Don't you have Dr. Seuss books to alphabetize or something?"

"Actually," Bruce replied, a tiny smile still playing across his lips, "I came to ask about Thanksgiving."

"And here, I thought you'd tell us more about Clint's failure to launch," Steve broke in.

This time, Bruce grinned. "Maybe I'll drop in a few of those stories at Xavier's this week, given that the only person who didn't realize Clint was interested was P—"

"Thanksgiving's a holiday," Clint interrupted, and Steve and Bruce shared victorious little grins as the fifth-grade teacher started scribbling more names on post-it notes. "Fourth Thursday in November, first became a holiday during the Civil War thanks to—"

"I more meant whether you're taking reservations for Thanksgiving with your in-laws yet," Bruce interjected.

At which time, Clint's meandering list of trivia was interrupted by him throwing his arms in the air like he was signaling a field goal. "Not my thing," he responded immediately, shaking his head. "Phil's thing. Phil's thing, he's possessive about it, and I don't want a repeat of last year."

Steve's mouth ticked up in a smile. "When you forgot to pass along how many acceptances?"

"I will 'lose' your boyfriend's Odinson green beans," Clint threatened, finger quotes and all, "and you will never get to have victory sex with him."

Steve rolled his eyes while Bruce laughed. "I'll talk to Phil, then," the kindergarten teacher said.

Clint nodded. "You better."

"Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen," Clint announced as he passed Xeroxed forms around. There were roughly twenty staff members who'd come out to payday happy hour, and it was time to start the annual pool. The annual pool for the canned drive, specifically.

Pepper looked down inquisitively at the form everyone was filling out. "Why is there a category for picking the class with the *fourth* highest total?"

"Because Odinson will buy out the top three spots for his kids," Jessica Drew answered from a table away.

"Is that jealousy I hear over the lack of pizza party for your class?" Bucky challenged.

His team lead rolled her eyes. "Please, Barnes. A few free slices of Papa John's is not worth dealing with that family."

Pepper smiled and turned her attention back to the betting form. There were the usual questions: How many total cans will be raised? On what day will Fury have to confiscate the microphone for the PA system because Darcy and Clint completely lost control during morning announcements? Which class will sucker Stark into buying cans for them?

"No one," Tony muttered to himself as he scribbled those two words as his answer for that particular question on his betting form.

"You know," Pepper said as she leaned in closer to her husband, "you could help yourself win some points on your own betting form by swaying the outcome on which class you're going to help."

"Nope, I refuse for that to be my reputation anymore. I will not be conned into going to Kroger because of the puppy dog eyes and pouty lips of eight-year-olds. Puppy dog eyes and pouty lips of attractive young women? Been there done that, but it was usually for contraceptives or even a pregnancy test a time or two." It took a moment for the heat of Pepper's glare to register. "Oh... really? Still too soon to joke about that?" He shrugged before raising his voice over the din of the bar to drive home his original point. "And whoever is telling their class that I'm loaded and willing and able to buy all the canned carrots—why is that even a thing, by the way—can knock it off."

Clint scoffed at him. "We don't have to tell them—you point out how rich you are all the time."

"And even if you didn't say it with words," Darcy continued, "it would be pretty obvious by your clothes, car, watches, fancy toys, and your wife's shoes."

Tony flipped her off as a response; she returned the gesture with both of her hands. Pepper covered Tony's bird with her own fingers and pushed his hand back down to the table before letting it go and giving it a little pat.

"I mean it," he told her. "I'm not doing it this year."

"Of course you aren't," she reassured him half-heartedly because she knew it was a bald-faced lie.

He gave her a look of shocked betrayal. "You don't think I'm serious?"

"I rarely think you're serious, Tony."

"I'm serious about plenty of things. Orgasms, for example." Pepper made sure to give a proper, wifely eye roll at his loud declaration as she took another sip of her martini. "And this. I'm dead serious about this, Pepper. This— The getting sucked into big, anime-esque, tearful eyes to raid the canned goods section of some convenience store at eleven o'clock for potato pearls—whatever the hell those are—is seriously no longer a thing."

Pepper shook her head and lowered her voice so she wouldn't besmirch his reputation too much. "You, despite what you may say otherwise, are a total sucker for helping those kids, and you know it. You could buy a car with the amount of money you spend on Girl Scout cookies each year."

He rolled his eyes. "No, you couldn't."

"Well, maybe *you* couldn't, but the average American could."

Tony waved off her comment. "Eating frozen Thin Mints is the closest I get to believing there might be a god out there somewhere. It has nothing to do with the kids."

"Whatever you say, dear."

Tony leaned backward on his stool a bit and began waving a handful of fingers at her. "Nope, no. Don't do that. I know that tone. That's your *You're wrong and I'm going to prove it to you* tone of voice. I strongly dislike that tone."

"Why? Because I'm always right?"

He pulled a face of dismissal, but never actually formed words to argue her statement. "Look, make you a side bet."

"What kind of bet?" she asked before taking another sip of her drink.

"The usual."

Their usual bet involved the following rules: if Pepper won, Tony gave her a grand to spend on whatever she wanted. If Tony won, he got a blowjob whenever and nearly wherever he wanted (obviously nothing to compromise their jobs, and for the ten millionth time—not in her office, Tony. Never where there is counseling of children.)

Pepper had once pointed out that she could get a grand out of him whenever she wanted. He'd shot back that the same could be said of his version of victorious spoils. She made sure the only touch he received was from his own hand for five days to prove him wrong.

Focusing back on their conversation, she asked, "So if you don't sneak cans into a class for some kids, you win, and if you cave—which you will—I win?"

"Yep."

"Deal."

The clink of her martini against his water sealed their bet, and Pepper began to plot which of the younger students she met with on a regular basis she would use to her advantage. You know, for

the good of the canned food drive.

"I get it, I do," Jessica Drew said, spreading out her hands. "Family first and everything. But also? Day spa."

Phil bit down on the edges of his smile and purposely refused to glance up from where he was sorting through the recent book returns for a very specific picture book for one of her students. A book she'd arrived to pick up and then hoard for him, since apparently they'd discussed it in class that morning and she wanted to send him home with it the next day.

"I thought this was a ladies-only retreat," he pointed out as he sorted through a pile of battered *Goosebumps*.

"We're making an exception," Jessica responded. Phil raised his head to glance at her, and she heaved a sigh. "We're trying to get the group rate," she admitted, and he smirked before going back to work. "We've got me, Carol, Ororo, and a couple maybes, but Cage punked out on us to go spend time with the in-laws—"

"Imagine that."

"—and either I expand our membership to the gays, or I'm forced to hang out with Carol's awful college roommate." He glanced up at her again, and she scowled. "She's a kindergarten teacher," she explained. "Fairy dust and constant smiles and all that sunny-side-up bullshit. Rainbows throw up when she walks into a room, Phil. *Rainbows*."

He laughed and, finding the book, pulled it out and quickly checked it in. "You've met my mother, right?"

"I think once, really quick."

"Then you know she would hunt us down and personally drag us back for dinner." He checked the book out and then handed it over the desk. "Sorry, but no."

Jessica narrowed her eyes. "I will rat you out to Steve for colluding with Clint to bring in extra cans for his class," she threatened.

"You'd have to give Steve information he doesn't already know for that to happen," Phil responded, and smiled as she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Truthfully, Phil wouldn't have accepted the invitation to the day spa even if his mother wasn't the *hunt you down and drag you* type. Not because he disliked the concept of a spa outing—though, admittedly, that was a small part of it—but because he loved Thanksgiving. He loved the food, he loved the companionship, and he loved that it was one of the handful of events every year where he, his husband, his family, and his friends all got to come together for a long weekend and really enjoy their time.

Clint mocked him sometimes for having a secret "holiday spirit." He'd hidden it almost through the entire Christmas season their first year together, until he'd pinched-hit as Santa at the school's holiday assembly and Clint'd noticed how much he enjoyed it.

Phil usually responded by reminding Clint how much he enjoyed the holiday smorgasbord Judy put together.

Speaking of Clint, Phil barely had time to start checking in his pile of returned books after Jessica's

departure before Clint came flying into the library. The canned food drive always turned his competitive streak up to eleven, and today was no exception.

"I'm not going back to Safeway so you can pull away from Cage again," Phil said by way of a greeting.

Clint grinned. "Seven ahead and it's only Wednesday. We're always slow-starters, we're bound to win." He hoisted himself up onto the circulation desk. Phil rolled his eyes. "Only surprise so far's Banner. Usually it's like herding cats with the kindergartners, but he's got a whole pile down there."

"Not even Steve follows the progress as obsessively as you do, you know."

"Hey, you're always complaining about how I could be more organized."

"At home, not in the canned food race."

"Maybe it'll translate."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "You've been the head of this for six years," he pointed out. "I gave up on hoping this'd teach you to sort your socks a long time ago."

Instead of keeping up the banter, though, Clint just grinned at him. "You love it."

"Keep telling yourself that," Phil returned, but he had to admit that he was smiling, too. He went back to checking in books to keep Clint from noticing, though. "Did you want something, or is this just my daily update?"

"I remember when you used to get all excited when I came to flirt with you in the library."

"And I remember when Stark walked in on us in my office, so let me ask you again: did you want something?" Clint wagged his eyebrows, and Phil sighed. "Besides that."

"I have to thank you for the Safeway run."

Phil rolled his eyes. "You 'thanked' me sufficiently last night, or did you forget the part where I could hardly drag myself out of bed this morning?"

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes a second time when Clint flashed him the world's most self-satisfied smirk. Though, if he was honest, he'd have to admit watching the line of Clint's side and back as he twisted around and leaned back enough to open one of the drawers on the desk, steal a stick of gum out of it, and then sit back up.

"You think Bruce is getting some?" he asked once he started chewing.

Phil frowned at him. "What?"

"I'm trying to plot against him," he replied, and then waved off Phil's concern. "He challenged my honor as a seductive bastard, it's a long story. Anyway, you think he's getting some? Think I could use that?"

"No," Phil said, shaking his head. "To the first part, not to whether you could use it." He paused for a second. "You could always get mom and the girls to harass him about it at Thanksgiving."

"Yeah," Clint mused, but then he turned around to look at Phil. "He RSVPed, then?"

"Yes. Although his reply e-mail did include the part where, quote, 'your husband refused to

acknowledge that I accepted the invitation."

"Your mom almost skinned me alive when Stark, Nat, Bruce, *and* Carol all took us up on it the one time," Clint defended. "I thought I'd be voted off the island."

"She did really like Carol," Phil noted as he put the checked-in books back on the cart.

"Which is why I'm extra-glad they're doing the spa day thing instead of tagging along." He chewed his gum contemplatively for a moment. "So, just Banner and Nat?"

Phil nodded. He leaned back in his desk chair and watched as Clint shifted around on the desk just enough that they could look at each other. He had an extra button of his shirt undone and his sleeves rolled up. That, combined with the messy hair, hinted that it'd been a long day even before the nightly can-count round-up. Phil would be glad to drag him home.

"Tony and Pepper are headed out to the farm," he said after a couple seconds of admiring his husband, "the girls are doing that spa day, and apparently the feud between Darcy and her second-cousin twice-removed is over. It'll just be the four of us."

"Cool," Clint replied, but it didn't sound cool. He swung his legs idly. "It's kind of weird that the group keeps dwindling," he added. "I mean, the first couple years, it was the whole crew. They keep pairing off, we keep losing the usual suspects."

"Well, no one could have expected that Tony would con someone into marrying him," Phil pointed out.

"I heard that!" Tony bellowed from the computer lab, and both Phil and Clint laughed.

Clint slid off the desk after that, though, shrugging as he moved. "I like the big holidays," he admitted. He leaned his hip slightly against the desk and shook his head. "That's all."

"I know," Phil said quietly. They'd talked more than once about the childhood Clint'd struggled through, and how different his holiday season'd always been from the norm. Phil—secret holiday spirit and all—liked giving him the big family events and putting up the ridiculous decorations. Even if Birdie did have a habit of trying to eat low-hanging ornaments at Christmas.

Clint nodded a little and flashed Phil a smile. It had just enough of the shy, sad Clint in it—the Clint he liked to keep hidden—that Phil spent a minute scanning the stacks before he stood up, hooked his fingers in the sleeve of Clint's shirt, and kissed him lightly. He felt the tension in Clint's body uncoil even before he stepped away, and rubbed his hand along Clint's arm. "I'll be good to go in half an hour," he said.

Clint grinned, normalcy restored. "And I can thank you for those cans all over again?"

"If I can survive it," Phil returned, and Clint laughed.

He was almost all the way out the door, and Phil on his way to reshelving the books on his cart, when he called through, "At least we know we'll hold onto Nat."

Phil glanced over at him. "Oh?"

Clint grinned. "Yeah. Because if she ends up all coupled up, I'm making sure we drag him into *our* family along with her, case closed."

Bucky heard footsteps enter his classroom. They were too light to be Steve's—not that his brain automatically assumed it would be the art teacher. Hoped? Sure, but didn't assume.

Instead, the footfalls belonged to Natasha. She walked in and meandered around the desks to stand next to Bucky in the middle of his classroom. "It's driving you crazy having all these cans in here, isn't it?" she asked with a smirk on her face.

"I'm running out of room. I wanted to the kids to work in groups tomorrow, but how can I when I've lost an entire corner of my class?"

"Just wait till Friday."

Bucky groaned his response. He stared down the canned vegetables that seemed to be reproducing like Tribbles and spreading everywhere despite the fact that it was only Wednesday. He knew deep down he should be proud of his students for caring so much and being so generous with their donations, and all the food they'd be able to donate from his class alone should put a smile on Steve's face.

And Bucky was becoming a huge fan of smiles on Steve's face.

He was jerked out of his reverie when Natasha's manicured nail poked him in the cheek. He tried to slap away her hand, but her reflexes were too quick.

"Thinking about him again, huh?" she asked, the smirk now blossomed into a full-on, feral grin.

"Maybe."

She scoffed at him. "James, you are the worst liar." She paused to stretch exaggeratedly in order to make sure a certain art teacher across the hall wasn't within earshot. "So, you hit that yet?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Unlike you, I believe there can be more to a relationship than just sex."

Natasha shrugged her disagreement. "I'll take that as a no."

"Do I even want to know how detailed the betting pool is for this subject matter?"

"Probably not, but if you could move things along around the twentieth of the month, I'll give you a cut of the winnings."

"Why am I friends with you people again?"

"Because we found you a hot piece of ass, that's why," Natasha answered. "You should do something about that."

"The level of hotness, or the fact that it is merely a *piece* of an ass and not the entire thing?"

She shoulder-bumped him. "You know what I mean."

Bucky looked down at her with a skeptical look. "Sometimes I think you're more of a dude than I am."

"Probably."

He turned so he could face her full on and crossed his arms over his chest. "Speaking of hitting it, how are things going with your beneficial friend?"

"We're not discussing this."

"Oh, so it's fair for you to come in here and interrogate me, but I can't return the favor?"

"Basically."

He shook his head. "You're no fun."

"I'm plenty fun," she said with an evil grin.

Bucky grimaced. "Okay, just because I want to know who you're banging doesn't mean I want details of the actual banging. I have enough experience walking in on you from college to last me a lifetime. Anyway, I actually get to go home for Thanksgiving this year. Wanna tag along? You know my mother thinks of you as her fifth daughter."

Natasha eyed him wearily for a moment before answering, "You're an idiot."

"What?"

"You think if I go with you it will distract your mother and sisters from ganging up and asking a billion questions about Artsy McHotness—"

"Okay, you know I'm going to have to tell him about that nickname."

"—when in reality you should know full well that I will easily be swayed to their side with homemade pasta and perfectly-cooked fish. You won't stand a chance."

He sighed. She was right, as usual—not that he'd ever admit that part aloud. Bucky'd hoped that if she tagged along for his short trip home, he could distract his family with his friend and tales from the old days, but no. Natasha would play right into the hands of his sisters and mother. And the five of them were terrifying enough without his old friend's assistance.

"So what are you going to do instead?" he asked. "Join up with Drew and whoever else for the spa getaway thing?"

Natasha shook her head. "Banner and I usually join in on the Coulson family get-together." Bucky's eyebrows shot up in surprise, causing Natasha to shrug. "Phil's parents always want him to bring home friends who don't have families around. It used to be Stark, too, back in the pre-Pepper days. But now it's just Banner and I."

"You staying with Phil's parents?"

"No," she responded. "Phil and Clint take their guest room. Banner and I stay at a hotel."

"Same room?" Bucky prodded.

She rolled her eyes. "We're adults and it saves money."

Bucky shrugged. "Just wondering what your sexy friend thinks about you spending the night with another man in a hotel."

Natasha mirrored his posture, crossing her arms underneath her own chest and even for Bucky the sight proved to be a teeny bit distracting. "Maybe my sexy friend won't mind, because he's the one I'll be sharing a hotel room with."

Bucky's eyebrows knit together in concentration as he took in her expression—one that screamed of

a challenge to call her out on such a statement being the truth. As a result, Bucky began to laugh. Hard.

"Yeah, right," he said, once he got his breathing under control. "Banner's, what, ten years older than you? Mister Goody-Two-Shoes being all adorable and singing songs about letters with six-year-olds? Like that's your type. And judging from his arm hair alone, he has to strongly resemble a gorilla when he's naked. There's no way you'd be into that."

"Have a good night, James," was her only response as she gracefully spun on her toe and sashayed out of his room.

"There's no way," he called out after. He never got a response. "No way," he muttered to himself. "Right?"

"Wait, wait, okay, hold up," Tony interrupted, and almost snagged Diego by his t-shirt to drag him back into the computer lab. "I was being sarcastic. It's like a joke that you don't really mean." The first-graders stared at him. "You can't annoy Mister Coulson enough to convince me to buy cans for your room, is what I mean," he explained, and he swore to god, they all whined in unison.

Tony hated the canned food drive. He hated the way the kids got whipped up into a frenzy about it, he hated the stupid games the specials played to earn extra cans for the usual classrooms, he hated Thor Odinson's voice echoing down the hallway, and he hated *this*. Because here was how it happened every year:

Some wolf in sheep's clothing colleague of his mentioned casually that Mister Stark *happened* to have a lot of money, and if only *some* class could convince him to part with it for canned goods, well, wouldn't that be *lucky*?

He suspected Rogers. Rogers garnered that kind of pull with the little snot-nosed hellions.

But now it was Thursday, and Tony felt like he'd been dropped in the middle of the freaking Hunger Games. Especially since, this year, every wide-eyed pleading look and well-timed lip-wobble served as a reminder that there were blowjobs on the line.

And money.

But mostly, blowjobs.

"But you said you'd buy us cans," Chrysanthemum pointed out. No, really, her parents actually named her that. Tony hoped she found a great job in the future that'd pay for her years of therapy.

"No," Tony replied, and leveled a finger at her. Most the other members of marauding horde were finally returning to their educational math video games. "I conditioned possible purchase on a condition that can never happen."

"What?" asked Lewis.

Tony sighed and planted his ass on the corner of his desk. Chrysanthemum, Diego, and Lewis all stared at him like he was about to explain the meaning of life. "Okay, look," he said, and spread out his hands in front of him. "You ever go to the store and ask your Mom—"

"I have two dads," Chrysanthemum interrupted.

"You're a Doctor Phil special waiting to happen, then," Tony informed her, and waited until she

frowned to continue. "Anyway, you're at the store, you ask your appropriately-gendered parental unit for a candy bar or whatever, but they don't want to give it to you. So, what do they say?"

"You'll ruin dinner," Lewis answered, and *wow*, did he sound bitter about that one.

"It wouldn't be fair unless Poppy and Violet get them too," Chrysanthemum replied.

Tony tried not to visibly shudder at those names. He hoped to hell they were cousins or something, because otherwise, somebody needed to call children's services on those fathers. "What else?"

"Maybe if you clean your room?" Diego attempted.

"Bingo!" Tony announced. He snapped his fingers and everything, catching the attention of some of his less-engaged ankle-biters. He waved them all back to their games, then pointed at the current three-child congregation of the Church of Tony Stark. "And what happens if you actually clean your room just like you're told?"

Lewis crossed his arms over his chest. "No candy," he muttered.

"Exactly." Tony crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "So, see, I was doing to your class the same thing that your parents've been doing to you since they realized how Pavlovian kids are."

"But we're losing," Diego said. Well, whined, honestly. Diego whined it.

"We only have a couple cans," Chrysanthemum added.

"Everybody's gonna make fun of us," Lewis chimed it.

Diego nodded. "We'll be the worst in the whole school—"

"—we won't get a shouting-out from Mister Barton on the big speaker—"

"—and Mister Coulson buys cans for Mister Barton's class, Violet said so—"

"—that we needed the corn for our house and took it out of my backpack—"

"—called it 'spirit of givingness' and that means doing nice things, not—"

"Enough!" Tony announced, because *holy crap*, it was like the millions of voices that cried out before Alderaan exploded, those three little kids whining in unison. They all buttoned up their lips right away, and he took a second to remember what actual quiet sounded like. Well, quiet interrupted by video game laser blasters and mouse-clicks, but whatever.

Diego, Lewis, and Chrysanthemum all peered up at him pathetically.

He scrubbed a hand over his goatee. "Okay, look, here's how we're going to play it," he said after a couple seconds, "but you need to keep your big mouths shut about it." The kids all nodded in agreement and leaned in, like they were about to get the inside scoop on a big secret. Tony leaned in, too, but mostly because he didn't want the rest of them nosing in and creating a giant first-grade dog pile. "You're all in the after-school program, right?"

They nodded again.

"End of the day today, and every once in a while until the end of the school year, I'm gonna come down to the after school program and I'm gonna grab you three. And you'll come up here, with me, and help me out with whatever I need. Wiping down desks, stacking chairs, testing out new

software, anything I say."

Diego's eyes widened to the size of small planets. "Like spies?"

"No, not like spies, you're six," Tony corrected. Diego frowned at him. "Like— I don't know. Sidekicks or something. Helpers."

"Like Robin," Chrysanthemum informed Diego, who at least looked a little happier.

"Right. And in return for your sidekick services—which had better be awesome, by the way, since I'm agreeing to this and it literally goes against everything I believe as a human being, this altruism stuff—"

"All-tree-ism?" Lewis repeated.

Tony waved a hand. "Mister Rogers's 'spirit of givingness,' whatever. Just focus." The kids leaned in even further. They were maybe just a little bit cute. Maybe. "My point is: you do this for me, you might find a bag of canned goods hanging in each of your coat cubbies tomorrow. No questions asked."

Their faces lit up like freaking Christmas trees. Tony put a stop to that by holding up his hands. "You tell a living soul, and I swear to you, I will eat every can of creamed corn myself."

"We *won't*," they promised in creepy first-grade unison, and then, miraculously, finally went back to their desks to play their games. Thank god.

it doesn't count as a loss if i'm exchanging the cans for goods and services, he informed Pepper in an e-mail a couple minutes later from his throne of wheeled glory in front of the classroom. He sent the message and everything—convenient since, less than three seconds later, Chrysanthemum popped up next to his desk right then.

He resisted the urge to shriek in surprise. "What?" he asked.

"Miss Potts said you were the nicest," she half-whispered. Conspiratorial-like, like maybe she knew at the tender age of six that she was dangerously close to ruining Tony's street cred.

Tony frowned at her. "What?"

"She said you were secretly the nicest and liked the can games."

"She did, did she?"

The kid nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, she was at least two-thirds lying," he returned. "Back to the game. I want all those numbers munched, or whatever you do in math games these days."

Chrysanthemum grinned delightedly at him and then ran back to her seat to finish the damn game.

When Tony turned back to the computer, there was an e-mail waiting. *I think "caving" necessarily includes reverse bribery*, the e-mail read, in Pepper's disgustingly perfect spelling and grammar. *Guthrie's first-grade class, then? Kroger after work?*

i think you cheated, Tony fired back, fast enough that the keyboard clattered a little. *your little spy outed you as the mole. i think for that, you need to give me a grand and the other, sexier, much better reward. only fair.*

It was all of thirty seconds before a reply chimed in his inbox. *Or, I'll wear the Beyonce boots tonight, and then the boots you're about to purchase me next time. Everybody wins.*

Tony pretended to consider it. *deal*, he sent back after a record-breaking ten-second delay, and then went to stop Meredith from dismantling her mouse. Again.

Thor'd barely made it through the mudroom and into the kitchen when he felt a child latch onto each of his legs. He laughed, leaned over to kiss Jane's cheek, and then crouched down to wrap his large arms around his daughter and younger son. Once he pulled away, he let his gaze switch back and forth between their faces like he was observing a tennis match. "I am missing a child," he declared.

"He got in trouble," Alva informed her father with a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Would you like to get in trouble, too?" Jane asked without looking up from the pasta salad she was preparing.

"No, ma'am," Alva answered, her back going ramrod straight at the threat of a punishment.

"Then go play. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes." The pair of children scurried out of the kitchen as Jane set the salad aside to check on the chicken baking in the oven. "He's mad at you. That's why he got in trouble."

Thor felt his eyebrows knit together in confusion as he reached for a piece of fruit. "Why is he mad at me?"

Jane gave him a stern look. "Did you not hear me just say dinner will be ready in ten minutes?"

"I have not eaten since breakfast. A mere banana will not ruin my appetite."

"Bad day at work?"

"Just busy. I spent all my afternoon with the Hansons, debating which wood to use for the cabinets."

"Haven't they already changed their mind about that like four times?"

Thor shrugged his answer since his mouth was full. Once he swallowed, he replied, "To be fair, this is only the second time for the cabinets. You should have seen how long it took them to decide which side of the house the garage should be on." He quickly finished the rest of the banana and threw the peel in the giant bowl on the counter set aside for the compost. "You did not say why Henry is upset with me."

"The canned food thing," Jane answered as she pulled the glass dish containing chicken breasts from the oven. "Which I would like to reiterate is not a good idea. Our kids need to learn how to lose at competitions, and this is prime evidence of that."

"Did they not win?" he asked. "I thought I brought enough for all three of their classes to ensure victory."

And it was true. He, along with one of construction workers, had brought in a gross of canned goods for each of the Odinson children's classes. And that was on top of the supplies Thor and Jane had already sent them to school with each day this week.

"Of course they won. Each of their classes won for their grade—they'll get the promised pizza party."

"Then why is Henry upset?"

"Why don't you go ask him yourself?" Jane said in attempt to dismiss him from the kitchen so she could finish getting dinner ready. "Hopefully by now he's done throwing things."

Thor heaved a sigh as he made his way toward the stairs. All his children had tempers, something he was only half to blame—not that he would ever point that out when Jane was in earshot.

He'd noted a voicemail from Mister Barnes on his phone, but he hadn't had time to check it yet. He considered pausing halfway up to the second floor of the home to listen to the teacher's side of things, but decided to hear what his son had to say first.

Knocking on the door to the boys' bedroom, Thor waited a moment but didn't get a response. "Henry, open the door."

"I don't wanna talk to you," came a small voice from inside.

"Henrik, I build houses for a living. I know how to take a door off its hinges if need be. You do not want to know what your punishment will be if it comes to that."

He heard some angry muttering from within the bedroom before the door opened barely an inch.

Thor took what he could get and pushed the drawing-covered door open the rest of the way. Henry was already back in his top bunk, eyes red from crying. The room was in disarray as a result of whatever temper tantrum the boy had thrown.

Sticking his hands in his pockets, Thor walked over to stand next to the bed. He was at eye level with his son, even though Henry wouldn't look at him. "Why are you upset?"

"You lied," Henry sniffled quietly.

"And how exactly did I do that?"

"You said you were going to bring a bunch of cans to my classroom this morning and you didn't. You lied."

Thor took his hands out of his pockets and crossed his arms over his broad chest. "I clearly remembering purchasing all the cans needed to ensure your class's victory today. And I remember loading them in my truck and taking them to school this morning."

"Yeah, but it wasn't you who brought 'em to my class," the boy argued. "*You* didn't do it."

"I care to dis—"

"I've been telling the kids in my class all week how you were going to show up on Friday every year like you always do. How you were going to walk into class with more cans than anyone could count and make sure we got our pizza party."

Thor nodded. "I see. So even though you still won—not necessarily earned, but won—your pizza party. You are still upset with me?"

"It wasn't you who brought them to class."

He sighed. "Do you know who the man was who delivered the cans to your classroom?"

Henry shrugged. "Maria's dad. He works for you."

"Yes. I brought him with me this morning so he could help me. Do you know why your school collects those cans?"

The child fought an eye roll. "All we've heard from Mister Rogers and Mister Barton on the announcements the last two weeks is how the cans are needed to help families have food for Thanksgiving."

"That's right, because not all families have a pantry as overflowing as ours."

"I still don't see why it wasn't you who brought the stuff in this morning," he grumbled.

Thor leaned in slightly toward his son. "Can you keep a secret? One that you can't tell anyone, especially your classmates?" It was the first time since Thor walked into the room that Henry actually looked interested in speaking with his father; the boy nodded. "Do you know what Hector was doing three years ago?"

"No."

"Looking for a job. He couldn't find one, and his wife—Maria's mother—had to stay home with all their kids because they couldn't afford daycare." Thor leaned in further before sharing his sensitive piece of information. "They were one of the families who received food from the school so they could have a Thanksgiving dinner."

"Son, you have no idea what it is like to be poor, to be needy. And, frankly, neither do I. But I know the look in the eyes of the men who come to me begging for work. And I am grateful that I've never had that fear of not being able to care for my family."

Thor leaned back away with a shrug. "But now Hector doesn't have that fear in his eyes anymore. He can feed his family. And this morning, he got to help feed other families who were in the same place he was." He grinned as he recalled Hector proudly placing three cans of creamed corn he'd brought from his own home on top of the stack of green beans he'd wheeled down to Mister Barnes's class. "How could I deny him of that joy?"

"He did seem pretty happy when he got into the class. So did Maria. They ran around the room giving everyone high fives."

"And did you high five them in return?"

"No," Henry responded with a hint of shame in his voice. "I was mad that you weren't there."

"We will be writing an apology letter to Hector, Maria, and Mister Barnes for your poor attitude."

"But—" the boy began to whine.

"And," Thor continued in a voice loud enough to carry over his son's, "I can ask your mother to arrange for a doctor's appointment at the same time as your pizza party if your poor attitude continues." The threat caused the boy's mouth to clamp shut. "You will also not be allowed to do anything involving a screen—television, video games, computer—this weekend. It will give you time to think about what it is like to have less than what you have in your life."

"Do you understand now why I did what I did this morning?" The boy gave a half-hearted shrug as

an answer, and it was Thor's turn to fight an eye roll. "Good enough. Give me a hug, and then we're eating dinner. And you and I will be responsible for dishes this evening."

"But it's George's turn," the boy whined. Thor raised his eyebrows in a silent challenge. "Fine," Henry huffed.

Chapter End Notes

And in case you weren't aware, if you would like to purchase stickers or shirts relating to this universe or the_wordbutler's MPU, that is a thing you can do:
<http://www.redbubble.com/people/justsaranoh/shop>

Thanksgiving

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the staff visit families (or spas) to celebrate Thanksgiving. A number of them getting an earful from relatives on how they should handle their relationships.

Platonic Science Life Partner: *Stop being so melodramatic, Tony.*

i am not being melodramatic i am literally losing my mind and i need to know strategies to avoid the inevitable baby discussion before i say something that leads to my divorce!

"Tony?" Pepper called from outside the bathroom door.

"In a second!" he yelled back. It perfectly covered the chime of his cell phone. He thumbed the display and resisted banging his head against the wall.

Platonic Science Life Partner: *Clint would like to note that your divorce is the inevitable part of the conversation. Natasha and Phil agree.*

i hate all of you, Tony texted back, and then shoved his phone in his pocket.

He made a point of flushing the toilet and washing his hands after that, just to make sure Pepper thought he was really using the bathroom. In her defense, it wasn't her fault that he'd needed to run and hide like he thought a bomb might blow up in the kitchen. No, the Potts family Wednesday night pre-Thanksgiving—the women handling the prep work for the meal the next day, the men standing around talking, the couple little kids running around and causing trouble—was pretty much as awful as ever, Pepper's company included.

Except for, you know, one thing.

He wiped his hands on his jeans and opened the door with a grin. "Miss me?" he demanded.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "I was starting to think you fell in."

"Hey, I've offered a dozen times to chip in and help them install a second bathroom. You're the one who always—okay, pun intended, this is great—poo-poops it."

She sighed. "Tony—"

"I know, I know, best behavior," he said, holding up his hands. He watched the corner of her mouth kick up into a tiny grin, and he grinned back at her. "No bad puns, no pointing out your uncle's massive bigotry, no dropping comments about how they could spend just a *little* capital and maybe modernize this whole place—"

Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, and he reached out and grabbed her hands. He knew he was holding on a little hard, too, so he turned it into a squeeze. "Best behavior," he repeated, then kissed her on the cheek and let her go.

Truth be told, he didn't really mind Pepper's family in tiny doses—he got along pretty well with her

parents, who were happy to have a son-in-law with cash who treated their only girl like she was made out of marble and gold, and her brothers tolerated him—but as a group, it was just a lot to handle. It never felt like a Coulson family get-together, where everybody who walked in the door was immediately family; he felt like an outsider, part of an us-versus-them where every cousin thought he was a city slicker and every aunt thought he was a bastard.

By the time he walked back through the living room, nodding hellos at the various and sundry distant relations with names he never remembered, Pepper was back in the kitchen with her mom, aunts, and cousin Jess. Jess had Potts-family freckles and the red hair, as did Jess's cute, fat, happy baby. Tony stood for a second and watched Jess hand the kid to Pepper for the sixth or seventh time in the last few hours, and then headed for the drink table. He stared at the half-empty bottle of whisky a little longer than necessary before pouring himself a ginger ale—stereotypical, sure, but cold and delicious—and wandered out to the back porch where some of the uncles and brothers were loudly discussing football. He was pretty good at the sports conversation, and at the fake grins at bad racist jokes, so it all worked out.

And if he hung around on the porch after everybody else finished their smokes and walked back inside, hey, you couldn't prove anything.

"Are you hiding?" Pepper's tone was accusatory as she stalked out onto the porch, and Tony flinched. His cup was empty, but he stared at it anyway, just in case it decided to refill itself. "Are you actually hiding from my parents? From my *cousins*?"

"We were having important discussions," he retorted.

"Yeah, until fifteen minutes ago, when Uncle Joe came in and complained you were squirrelier than usual." Pepper pulled the door shut behind her, then rested her hands on her hips. "What gives?"

"Why does something have to give?"

"Because you're hiding."

"I already said I wasn't hiding, I was discussing matters of national interest, current events and the Patriot Act and—"

"The *Patriots*, maybe, and their likelihood to lose to the Colts." Her hands tightened on her hips. Tony tried very hard not to find her angry face sexy, but the whole "talking competently about sports" made that even harder. "I swear to god, Tony, if I have to explain to my own mother why my husband's sleeping on the couch after being a monumental asshole, I—"

"Your mom asked me about kids," Tony interrupted, because he certainly didn't want to end up sleeping on the couch. It was uncomfortable, and some of the springs poked. Pepper stopped talking and closed her mouth into a soft line. "Okay? An hour ago, your mom saw you with that fat baby cousin and the kid questions, they just came shooting out. And since it was either saying something stupid or coming out here, I took the high road. High-ish road."

For a long couple seconds, Pepper was absolutely silent. Perfectly silent, silent as the grave, and Tony imagined a long three nights of sleeping on the stupid, threadbare couch. Then, out of the blue, she closed the distance between the two of them, raised a hand, and—

"Ow!" he shouted as she smacked him on the arm. "Dammit, we talked about this! Not the ring hand, that's *cheating*. I knew I should've gotten you a smaller diamond, that—"

"My mom asks you whether we're having kids and you *run away*?" she interrupted. She looked like she might smack him again, so he took a step back. "It cannot possibly be that hard to tell her we're not and move on with your life."

"Have you seen that woman? She's all round-faced and earnest and waiting for grandbabies—"

"That her sons can give her."

"—and I didn't know how to say 'that's never gonna happen' without being the world's biggest asshole." He rubbed his arm, not so much because it hurt but because it was a great distraction. "We've been married long enough that they're bound to get curious."

"Until we tell them we're not having kids," Pepper said in her most rational tone.

"Or until they naturally assume that it's my doing and I'm robbing you from a life filled with fat freckled babies who keep potbellied pigs as pets." She leveled him a truly nasty look, and he raised his hands in defense. "I'm just saying. I'd rather your whole family, half of which already hate me and think that I'm some sort of playboy come to rob you of your chastity—"

"You really think I was *much* better behaved in high school than I actually was."

"—not see me as a super shitty husband."

Pepper's glare softened, after a second, and Tony slowly lowered his hands. He considered reaching out and finding her arms, but he wasn't sure she wouldn't hit him again. He watched her lips press into some small semblance of a frown. "Does it really matter to you what they think?" she asked quietly.

"Uh, they're your family," Tony reminded her. "They kind of put you together during your formative years and then tossed you out into the world so I could find you. I owe them big time."

Her face softened the rest of the way, after that, so he decided to risk it and tug her into his grip. She hesitated for a split-second before agreeing to the hug, and even let him kiss her temple and shove his nose into her hair.

"This is not getting you out of actually sucking it up and telling my mom we're not having kids," she informed him.

He groaned. "But—"

"You owe them big time, remember?" she replied, and he swore to god, even without looking at her, that she was smiling.

Eh, he'd take it.

"I'm just saying, give it a chance," Jessica Drew said.

Carol groaned from under her mud mask and groped blindly for her drink (thanks, cucumber slices, for your invaluable service of making Jessica's best friend look totally ridiculous). They were stretched out and luxuriating on chaise lounges in the sun, their skin slowly baking while the mud masks did whatever mud masks were supposed to do. Jessica wasn't entirely sure, but the pedicure that morning had been nearly orgasmic, so she figured the mud mask was a safe bet.

Besides, Carol trying to handle a cocktail while blinded by random veggies was pretty hilarious.

"What is she giving a chance to?" Ororo asked from a couple chairs down.

"Tony's hot friend," Jessica answered.

"You have no proof he's hot," Carol reminded her. Jessica was pretty sure she was glaring from under her cucumbers. "He could be the Quasimodo of the armed services."

"Stark's pretty easy on the eyes," Monica Rambeau noted. She split her time between three different schools, working as a speech pathologist, and jumped on board as part of the lady's retreat literally a half-hour before Carol offered the spot to her super annoying friend. Jessica wanted to kiss her on the mouth for that.

Carol groaned again and downed the rest of her drink.

"She has a point," Ororo agreed.

"I wouldn't hesitate."

Every single one of them turned to the last chair in the row, where May Parker was stretched out in her spa-issued bathrobe. Her toenails, thanks to the pedicure artists, were bright pink, and her curly hair was damp from their swim earlier. She set down her half-finished mojito. "I'm just saying," she informed the silence around her. "He's young, but you know what they say about younger men."

"Uh, I think you should tell us and make *sure* we know," Jessica put in, and then swore when Carol reached over and slapped her in the gut.

May chuckled and shook her head a little, relaxing in the sun's toasty embrace. She'd joined in mostly because her grandson, Peter—annoying little hipster shit of a student teacher who wore jeans too skinny to be legal—was spending Thanksgiving at his girlfriend's. "If he proposes to her, I'll slap him," May'd promised as she'd turned over her check.

Apparently, May was not a fan of the girlfriend. Also, she was a bit of a badass, and Jessica kind of loved her.

"Why don't you people ever worry about someone else's love life?" Carol demanded once the silence swept over them again. "Harass Ororo."

"Oh, no," Ororo returned, shaking her head. "I've stopped dating for the time being. I cannot handle another guy who thinks proper first date etiquette is to ask where I'm *really* from." Monica reached over and offered Ororo a most righteous fist-bump. "I've started telling them I'm an African queen."

"Next time, go with Khaleesi," Jessica suggested. Ororo frowned at her. "Seriously? You don't know that reference? God, you people, what is—"

"What about you?" Monica interrupted. Jessica blinked at her. "You're pretty worried about Carol getting some hot man-action—"

"*Really?*" Carol groaned.

"—but aren't talking much about your love life."

"Because I have none," Jessica replied with a wave of her hand. She picked up her margarita and helped herself to a healthy swallow. "I have tried and tried to find a decent guy, but it's a critical fail

at this point. If a nunnery would take me, I'd be there in a second."

"Don't you have to be Catholic?" Ororo asked.

"Which is probably where I'd fail." She paused. "That, or on the whole 'don't really believe in a higher power unless HBO counts' thing."

She shrugged and took another swig of her drink while May sighed. "The problem for you girls is that there are so few available men at our school. You're in a job where your entire social circle is the men you work with, and they're all either married, gay, or married *and* gay." She grabbed her drink off the little table next to her. "It's a damn shame."

"There's always Banner," Monica pointed out. Everyone glanced over at her. "What? He's got that kind of rumpled scientist look going on. I mean, it's no leather-clad bad boy—"

"*One* time," Carol complained. "I went out with a biker that *one* time."

"—but he'd work in a pinch."

May set down her glass and turned to frown down the row at the rest of them. "You mean he isn't gay?"

For the first time since they sat down with their mud masks, Carol whipped her head around so fast that she lost her cucumbers. "What?"

"Doctor Banner. I mean, he never really pays attention to you girls, and he's as private as Phil was when he first started—"

"Oh god, where's my phone, I need to text this to somebody," Jessica said. Ororo rolled her eyes and, in a totally vindictive manner, stole her purse and slid it under Monica's chair (the jerk).

"—so I just assumed that his interests ran another way." May's eyes swept up and down the row. "Did I misread him?"

Ororo and Monica glanced at one another. "I think so," Monica said after a couple seconds. Ororo nodded in agreement. "I mean, he's private and everything, but I don't think he's *that* kind of private."

"And we kind of work at a place that's just one big gay pride parade," Jessica pointed out. "I mean, the only person who's ever tried to keep it under a bushel's the new guy, and he's pretty damn obvious about it."

"Well, and Steve," Ororo put in.

Jessica snorted. "Rogers never *hid* it," she returned. "He just tried to sweep it under all those skin-tight sweaters and really well-tailored khaki pants."

"The point," Carol interrupted, because it looked like Monica had some choice comments about Rogers's truly indecent khakis, "is that I'm pretty sure Bruce isn't gay. I'm just not sure he's what any of us are really looking for."

All of them, Jessica included, nodded in agreement. Hell, even Monica bobbed her head, and she liked the disheveled scientist vibe he had going on.

After a few seconds, May released a slow breath. "Well," she said, settling back onto her lounge

chair, "maybe what we should worry about is setting him up with a nice girl. I'm sure the only thing worse than being a lonely, single woman in that school is being a lonely, single man. Especially if Tony doesn't have any friends for him to date."

Carol heaved a sigh. "Oh my god, when will you people understand that I do not want to date someone who *likes* Tony Stark?"

"More importantly," Jessica said, ignoring the fact that Carol stole her drink right out from under her nose, "who are we going to set Bruce up *with*?"

"Mmm," May intoned, and closed her eyes. "We have three days here. I'm sure we can come up with someone."

Natasha volunteered to drive them all the two hours it took to get Phil's parents' house. Since she'd already driven Bucky to the airport that morning, she said she'd just keep up with taxi duties, and for doing so, she expected a generous tip. Bruce tried not to blush at the words, especially when she snuck him a look of heat that was there and then gone in the next second because Clint, Phil, and Birdie were in the backseat, and Clint had a habit of seeing everything.

The four arrived on Wednesday evening to spend some time with just Gregory and Judy before Phil's sisters and their families descended on the small home his parents had downsized into a few years back. Bruce appreciated the chance to enjoy the company of those around him, and of course, to eat some delicious homemade meals from Judy, even if at the moment they were just leftovers to help clear out the refrigerator for tomorrow's main event. The group caught Phil's parents up on the events of the school year so far—Bucky joining the staff and gossip of his relationship with Steve, the recent record-setting canned food drive, and how the Accelerated Reader contest was shaping up. In turn, Judy informed them of Phil's younger sister's recent promotion, the colleges his oldest nephew wanted to check out, and how the twins had managed to ask out the same girl in the same day without realizing the other had a crush on said cheerleader. Neither of them got a date.

They joked around when Tony frantically texted about being pressed on the topic of babies from his mother-in-law, each giving their own idea of how badly the man was panicking in the farm country of Virginia and wishing they could be there to watch the meltdown in person. Bruce made sure to sneak a text of *Are you okay?* a couple of hours after he last heard from Tony to just to check in like a good brother in sobriety and science should.

As the evening wore down, Natasha and Bruce excused themselves to go check in at the hotel down the road.

"I'm so glad you two could come," Judy said as she hugged them each good night.

"Thanks," Bruce said with a soft smile. "It's nice to be welcomed somewhere during the holidays."

"Anytime," Gregory reassured as he shook hands with Bruce and side-hugged Natasha.

"Is ten okay?" Natasha asked before they left. "What time should we help you get ready?"

Judy waved her off. "You are guests; you can come around one if you want when we start to eat."

"Bullshit," Clint called from behind his in-laws. "They've been to almost as many Thanksgiving dinners here as I have. If I'm going to be in the kitchen in the morning, then so are they."

Phil rolled his eyes before telling the pair that they could come over whenever they wanted.

"See you at ten," Bruce said before waving good night.

The car ride to the hotel was a quiet one. Bruce replayed moments from the evening in his head while wondering how long the smell of Judy's perfume was going to linger on his winter coat from the hug she'd given him. He checked them in at the front desk and passed over his credit card. In the elevator, Natasha asked how much she owed him, but he told her not to worry about it. Her response was to snatch the receipt from his hand and inspect it for herself. "I'll write you a check for my half on Monday."

He nodded, not really knowing how else to reply. He still didn't know what this thing with them was. They'd been friends for years, but now they were sleeping together on occasion. Bruce was kind of clueless with relationships before, but now he was completely lost.

Natasha grabbed a keycard from him and opened the door to their room. As he sets his bag down, he noticed a quizzical look pass ever so quickly over her face before it settled back into neutrality. "Two beds?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I didn't want to assume anything would happen. And even if it did, we've never actually spent the entire night together—which is fine, doesn't matter—but I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable."

She studied him for a minute before dumping her bag on the bed closest to her. "Or are you so paranoid that Tony will snoop and lose his mind if you'd only booked a single bed?"

"I wouldn't put it past him to do something like that."

"I told James." She admitted quietly.

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Yeah?"

"He thought I was joking."

Bruce snorted a laugh, threw his on bag onto the other bed, and wondered if they were telling people now. Should he ask? Should he wait until she seriously told someone and made sure they knew she wasn't joking? Would that change things even more? *This*, he reminds himself silently, *is why you haven't dated—or anything—since Betty.*

As they unpacked, he removed a small plastic package from the front pocket of his bag and threw it on the bed next to her. She picked them up with a faint smile on her face. "Earplugs?"

"I snore, so I bring those as a common courtesy to whoever has to share a room with me when I'm sleeping."

She gave him a small smile and placed the earplugs on the table between the two beds before setting her bag on the floor. He'd only seen that smile, a soft and honest one, a few times, and mostly when they were alone together. Which was something that hadn't happened before Jessica and Luke's wedding in the summer where, during the anniversary dance where most of their friends were on the dance floor and Carol had grabbed Steve's arm to lead him to the bar to get drinks for everyone, Bruce had let the words "I miss sex," fall out of his mouth. He blamed it, the total short circuit in his brain-to-mouth filter, on spending too much time with Tony.

Natasha'd looked over at him for a minute before her shoulders shook with quiet laughter. Later, when she'd grabbed his hand and pulled him on to the dance floor during a ballad, she whispered in his ear, "We could not miss sex together."

He'd pulled his face back to get a good look at her and make sure she was implying what he thought she was. "Ummm... Look, you don't have to—"

"No strings attached. I don't want a boyfriend."

"I didn't say that to get you to do something—"

"Bruce, I don't do anything I don't want to. Although, you do know Jenny Riker's mom would be more than willing to help you out with your problem."

He'd groaned at the mention of the mother who wouldn't leave him alone, even two years after her daughter had left his class. "I'm not dating a student's mother."

"Which is why I'm offering this for tonight," she said as she pulled him closer and pressed herself up against him for a brief second. "If you want it."

"Yes," he hissed, his brain giving up reason and only reacting to the feel of her against him.

"Good, get your jacket. Tell Tony bye, I'll leave a few minutes after you, and we'll meet back at my place."

He'd given into her offers twice more since that night in July. And it was hard for his brain to ignore the possibility of adding another tally mark to the score when talks of Thanksgiving had rolled around. But he hadn't expected anything. It would be great to eat his weight in Judy's cooking and do nothing else.

"I'm taking a shower," Natasha announced as she made her way into the bathroom. A second later, she poked her head around the door. "You joining me?"

"I'm just saying, you know, your father and I, we raised you to feel comfortable talking to us."

Bucky sighed. "Ma—"

"We wanted all our kids to grow up and not be afraid to be who they are. Did I ever come down hard on you about your choices? About the ROTC, about the service, about when you came out?" A pan hit the counter with a resounding thud. "Well, did I?"

He bit back a groan. "No, Ma."

"No. That's right. I supported you. And I told you, you ever need anything, you come to your mother." A hand nudged his elbow. "Don't stop stirring, the gravy'll get lumpy."

"Ma—"

"And now, here I am, entering my golden years with my beautiful grown children all out there in the world, and all I want is a little information on this new young man in your life but you are acting like I just—no, Sandra, the other set, that's right." Bucky glanced over his shoulder in time to see his niece swap out the good china for the crappy plates the kids were allowed to eat off of. "You're acting like I am asking you all about what kind of things you get up to in the privacy of your bedroom, not—"

"Ma," Bucky snapped, and all four sisters glared at him like he'd just killed their stupid cat.

Winifred Barnes was a spitfire of a woman, short, stocky, and with a gray bob that sat right at her chin. She also looked at Bucky like he was some kind of impostor child sent to make her cry, and

Bucky sighed as he kept right on whisking the gravy. The tiny kitchen in the house he grew up in was too small for the six of them plus Sandra, not that his mother seemed to notice. No, instead, she looked at him with abject disappointment and shook her head.

"I thought I raised you better," she said. The disappointment practically dripped from her tone, an attempt to drown him in guilt.

Bucky barely bit back the high-pitched whine that was pushing at the back of his throat. "Ma," he started, but she turned on her heel and walked right out of the kitchen to boss Sandra around about place settings, leaving him alone with—

"Oh, you've done it now," Tammy observed.

—his sisters.

In his mother's defense, not that she really needed it, Bucky'd known that the long weekend'd turn into an interrogation from the second he'd climbed into the car. He'd survived Wednesday night by the skin of his teeth and even managed to ignore all the quirked eyebrows from Rebecca's direction when he'd answered his text messages.

But Thursday brought over his brother George, his older sisters, plus the nieces, nephews, and his Auntie Ida (never mind her "roommate of twenty years" Meredith), and Bucky'd felt himself slowly circle right to the center of their attention.

Worse, Steve'd texted him a half-dozen times since he'd come down for breakfast. You know how dogs smell fear? Barneses smell potential boyfriends.

"How many text messages did you say he sent last night?" Lainey asked from where she was threading cloth napkins through their plastic rings.

Rebecca shrugged. "At least, like, forty."

Bucky twisted to stare at her. "You told me ten times you were reading Proust and ignoring me."

"Grad students need to relax sometime, you know." She stopped mashing the potatoes to smile oh-so-innocently at him. "At least when you used to hide things under blankets on the couch, it was awkward teenage e—"

"Okay, *no*," he cut in, and all four of them laughed. He went back to whisking the gravy, this time with a vengeance. "I was texting a coworker."

"Does he have a name?" Kristin asked.

"Most people do."

"Jamie," Tammy cajoled, and Bucky closed his eyes at the dreaded nickname. He'd grown out of Jamie in the third grade, not that any of his sisters believed that. If anything, it'd made Rebecca— younger than him by two years, the real baby of the family—use the stupid name more often. "Remember when you were dating that boy in college?"

"For the last time, I was never dating Alex," he ground out.

"Remember what happened?" his sister pressed. Bucky stared at the gravy. "Don't make us wrestle your cell phone away from you *again*."

"I'm not ten and hiding your pogs, Tammy," he retorted. Lainey squeezed behind him to get something out of a drawer, her hand planted on his hip. He shook her off. "You can't bully me into getting what you want."

"Mmm, he's right," Lainey agreed thoughtfully.

"He is?" Rebecca asked.

"He is. Also, the mystery man is apparently named Steve Rogers."

Bucky dropped the whisk into the gravy pot and whirled on his heel just in time to catch Lainey shoving something into her back pocket. He patted himself down quickly, realized that his phone was no longer in *his* back pocket, and stared. Lainey smiled sweetly and backed herself up against the nearest wall.

"Give it back," he demanded.

"Tell us something about *Steve*," Lainey returned. Tammy snickered, and Kristin grinned into the gravy she was busily rescuing from Bucky's negligent whisking. "Or more about that movie you'll just *have* to see next weekend."

"A movie date?" Rebecca asked.

"Are you going to yawn-and-stretch him?" Kristin wondered.

"I am going to kill you," Bucky decided. Lainey smiled sweetly. "You've met Nat. I bet she'd help. I bet she wouldn't even hesitate to—"

"Are you threatening your sisters with Natasha again?" Their mom wandered back in, Sandra hot on her heels, and started gathering up the ringed napkins from the kitchen table. A quick survey of the room later, and she paused. "Why is Kristin handling the gravy?" she asked.

"Because Bucky was telling us about his boyfriend," Tammy answered.

"He's not my boyfriend," Bucky informed her. He felt like he was back in high school, defending himself from accusations of having *girlfriends*.

"You're going to a movie," Rebecca noted.

"We haven't decided anything yet. It was a *suggestion*. I don't see—"

"Girls." Every eye in the room turned to their mother, who was still standing in the middle of the kitchen with her arms full of napkins. Bucky pulled in a breath and held it. "Go help Sandra and the kids set the tables."

Sandra frowned at her grandmother, aunts, and uncle. "We don't need help," she offered.

"You need help if Granny says you need help." Bucky watched as his mother handed off the napkins and then nudged the girl out the door. His sisters, however, stayed right where they were. "Girls?"

Within seconds, the four of them snapped into gear. Lainey even dragged Bucky's phone back out of her pocket and handed it over. Bucky snatched it from her, and after a second of scowling, she disappeared along with the others.

"Take care of the gravy," his mother said simply once the door swung shut behind them.

"Ma—"

"I will not have lumpy gravy, James."

Bucky sighed and resumed his position in front of the stove, whisking the gravy at a fair pace. His mother remained quiet for a few seconds, then almost a full minute; when he glanced over his shoulder at her, he found that she was leaning against the same wall that Lainey'd claimed. They watched each other, neither of them saying anything, before she finally sighed.

"Do you know how I knew that Krissy meant business with Robbie?"

"She hates it when you call her that."

"That wasn't the question." Her eyes narrowed. "Do you know how I figured out that Robbie was the first boy she was really serious about?"

"No, but I'd guess it was because she wouldn't shut up about him."

"Wrong. It was because she wouldn't talk about him." Bucky frowned, and his mother shook her head. "You probably don't remember this, seeing as there's eight years between you two, but Krissy was always a force of nature when it came to boys. She was always my— What do they call that girl in the hunger books? The one with the funny cat name?"

"Katniss?" he asked.

"The other name for her."

"The girl on fire?"

"Right. Krissy, she was always my girl on fire, always unstoppable, leaving me afraid she'd burn out." She smiled slightly. "But she came home from school that summer with a smile she couldn't stop and a boy we all knew existed but she wouldn't tell us a thing about. It took Georgie beating her to the phone every time it rang before we got it out of her."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I'm not Kristin," he reminded her.

"No, but you care like she does. You find something or somebody who matters, and you hold them right in your heart." When Bucky glanced at her again, it was in time to watch her cross the kitchen and come over to him. She looped an arm around him and pressed her head against his shoulder. He remembered when he used to do the same to her while she cooked, watching her turn random ingredients into something magical.

"I am proud of all my babies," she said, her voice softer than it was a few minutes ago. "I'm proud of Georgie for starting up his own business, for you and your sisters and your educations, for the good people my grandbabies are becoming and how hard *all* of you work to leave the world better than you found it. But I'm especially proud of you, how brave you are for loving this country—"

"Ma."

"—and, on top of that, never being afraid to be who you are to this family." She reached up and physically turned his face so he'd look down at her. He tried to smile, but he felt the heat rush into his ears, instead. Stupidly embarrassed by his mother, like he was twelve all over again. "You like this boy?"

He sighed. "Ma, listen—"

"James Buchanan Barnes, that was a yes or no question."

He swallowed. "Yeah," he admitted. "I do."

"And he deserves you?" Bucky huffed out a laugh. "I'm serious. This Steve, he's good enough for you?"

"He's practically a saint, Ma." Despite everything, he couldn't really keep the grin off his face. "He's— He's one of the best guys I've met, hands down. He's—" He rolled his lips together, trying to come up with the right word, and then just shook his head. "He's pretty great."

"Good." His mother rubbed his arm lightly and then let him go. "Finish up that gravy, and then somebody needs to make sure your dad and Georgie don't mangle that poor turkey. I spent too long on him to have us eating minced meat."

Bucky laughed a little and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek before she stepped away. It was only after a couple seconds of her puttering around the kitchen that he realized something that didn't add up.

"Ma?"

"Hmm?"

"How'd you know his name was Steve?"

Across the kitchen, his mother smiled. "Lainey isn't the only person who can steal a cell phone when you're not paying attention, honey," she answered, and then let herself out of the kitchen.

Jane watched Darcy sneak out of the back door and cross the yard to stand on the other side of the chain link fence. She took a sip of whatever was steaming in her mug before talking to Jane.

"You're going crazy already? It's only seven."

Jane shook her head. "They've been here since eleven. It's going to take days to detox the kids from time with their grandparents and Loki."

And it would. Jane knew this routine. Thor's parents would get the kids all hopped up on sweets and promises of Christmas gifts even better than last year's. In fact, that's what the kids were doing right now—writing down the list of things they wanted their grandparents to buy them as present next month. George was already on his third page of Buzz Lightyear notebook paper. And all of this was after her father-in-law snuck them dessert before the actual meal and Loki tried to teach them new pranks to play at school, and Jane had reached her limit.

Deep down she loved Thor's family, she really did. But liking them? That was a challenge on the best of days. But they were all the family her kids had since Jane's mom left when she was young and her scientist father passed away when she was in grad school. Sure, her research partner, formerly her father's research partner, stepped in from time to time to play a fatherly role to Jane and adopted grandpa to the kids, but he wasn't truly family.

Holidays sucked.

Hence, when it became a choice of drowning in the homemade bottles of mead her father-in-law had brought along or venting to someone, she'd texted Darcy to meet her outside at the fence.

"Do you need this?" her neighbor-slash-friend asked as she held out her mug for Jane.

She sniffed at the air. "Apple cider?"

"With a healthy dose of everclear."

Jane snorted and shook her head. "I try not to drink in front of the kids."

Darcy craned her neck around to inspect the yard. "Don't see any kids out here."

Conceding, Jane took the mug with a sigh. The drink was hot and the alcohol left a burn down her throat, but she managed to hold in the cough it threatened to cause. She handed it back to Darcy, who toasted her before taking a healthy gulp herself. "What are you drinking for?" Jane asked. "Your family's been together for, what, an hour?"

"Grandma got here at six-oh-two and by six-oh-eight was already asking me why I was still living at home and why I was still single. So, cheers," she explained before taking another drink. "Doesn't matter that I'll have my student loans paid off before any of my classmates, oh no," she grumbled. "I am single and under the roof of my parents who would, according to my grandmother, much rather be driving around the country in a Winnebago—which they don't want nor own—visiting national parks. My parents hate the outdoors." She sighed as she looked up at the night sky. "I was born in the wrong country. Why can't I live in one of those countries where it's normal to stay with your parents when you're an adult? And with the added bonus of my super pale skin and fantastic boobs, I would be queen of the land within days."

Jane tilted her head. "How many of those have you drunk?"

"Not enough."

A loud crash sounded from within the Odinson house, and Jane swore under her breath. She'd learned years ago to put away the fragile breakables for family dinners, but apparently her efforts went in vain. "I'd better get back inside. Good luck with your relatives. And don't drink too much—don't want to do Black Friday shopping with a hangover."

"I can still shop while drunk, though, right?"

Jane rolled her eyes and crossed the yard and deck to step back inside the warm home. She was greeted by the sight of Alva standing on a stepstool at the sink looking down at Frigga, who was picking up shards of glass from a shattered pie plate. "Oh, here," Jane said as she grabbed the broom from inside the pantry.

Her mother-in-law took the broom and began to sweep, but waved off any further assistance from Jane. "No need to worry. Just a little dish-drying accident."

"Sorry, Grandma," Alva apologized.

"It's quite alright, dear."

"Frigga, we can replace that if—"

Her words were cut off by the older woman's laughter as she stood and dumped the pieces of glass into the trash. "Jane, the thing came from IKEA. I raised all three of the so-called men sitting in your living room right now. I know better than to have nice things around."

"Mommy, mommy—guess what!" Alva exclaimed once she thought it was safe to sound excited instead of forcing solemnity over the broken pie plate. "Grandma's going to buy me a horse."

Jane felt her stomach drop as she tried to keep a neutral expression on her face. "She is?"

"Yes, for Christmas," the young girl practically squealed.

Frigga laid a reassuring hand on Jane's shoulders. "I told her we'd pay for horseback riding lessons. You will not own a horse."

Jane exhaled the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "Oh, okay."

"I read in a magazine the other day that horseback riding helps with coordination and balance, and there's all sorts of psychological and emotional benefits, too. So, I thought we'd pay for the children to have some lessons. Can't have all their Christmas presents be toys they'll be bored with two days after they receive them, despite what their grandfather says." She paused to turn back to her granddaughter. "But this won't start till spring when the weather gets warmer, alright?"

Alva nodded before looking at Jane. "Mommy, how many days 'til spring?"

"Probably a few more than you want there to be."

The four-and-a-half year old slumped for all of three seconds before the thought of horses became too exciting again. She began bouncing up and down till Jane reprimanded her for jumping while on the footstool.

"What do you think?" Sarah Rogers asked as she inspected the worn table with the four mismatched chairs.

Steve paced around the furniture, taking in the joints and imagining the quality of the grain of wood hidden beneath at least three coats of paint. "Where would you put 'em?"

His mother shrugged. "Basement for now. I think I'll refinish them and then put them on the back porch when the weather warms up. David has a grill that he can bring over, and we can throw dinner parties outside."

Steve tried not to roll his eyes as his mom found yet another opportunity to drop the name of the man she'd been dating for the last four months. He'd met this David, and sure, he was a nice enough guy, but no one would ever be good enough for his mother. Ever.

He ran his hand along the seat of one of the chairs, his brain flipping through ideas of what the table and chairs could become. A moment later he stood with a shrug. "I think they have potential, but not for that asking price."

Sarah peeked around her son to inspect the man in charge of selling things for the flea market booth they were standing in. "Think you could flirt with him a little to get the price down?"

"Mom," Steve groaned.

"What? I have a handsome son. And if that handsomeness can knock fifteen dollars off that price, then perhaps it will be worth the nineteen hours of labor I endured to bring you into this world."

"I'm not flirting with him."

She raised a blonde-gray eyebrow at him. "Saving all your flirting for your phone?"

He was proud of himself for not blushing. Instead, he crossed his arms over his broad chest and looked down at her. "Like you really have room to talk?"

Sarah rolled her eyes at him. "Please, Steven, it's not like we're sexting or whatever you kids call it."

"Well, that's a mental image I never needed in my brain," Steve shot back. He pointed at the table. "You want this or not?"

She stared at the furniture for a moment before shaking her head. "Not speaking to me as much as it was a minute ago. You hungry?"

"Always."

The pair moved through the aisles of the various stalls and shops setup in the massive warehouse converted to a flea market. At the north end of the structure, a number of vendors had food stalls. Sarah ordered lunch for both her and Steve at the hot dog cart. This—shopping for trash that could be turned to treasure—was their version of Black Friday. Or any weekend they could spend together really.

Since he was little, his mom taught him how to use his hands as tools to making something new out of something old. It was one of the ways Sarah tried to make up for the loss of his father. And it was also probably why Steve had the degree and job he did.

They quietly munched on their hot dogs and chips until Sarah gently kicked his ankle under the table. "When's your next test?"

"Couple weeks," he answered, not looking forward to the annual round of doctor's appointments, blood tests, and scans.

"You've been feeling okay, though, right?"

He gave her reassuring smile. "Never felt better."

She stared at him a minute before giving a small nod and looking back at her lunch.

Steve tried to ignore the flashes of memories from his childhood: the long nights where he silently wondered if his body was going to give up on him, the endless doctor visits, and the loneliness that came with severe childhood illness. But some of the worst memories were how his mother never seemed to leave the hospital. She'd work her shift two floors up and then spent her nights at his side in the pediatric unit.

He hated the look of worry that she always tried to hide, hated seeing it still on her face now as they both began the annual tortuous wait to hear whether or not his body had decided to betray him again.

"So, what did David do for Thanksgiving yesterday?" he asked.

She looked up at him with skepticism in her eyes. "You really want to know?"

He shrugged. "You care about him, I figure I should at least ask."

"Make you a deal—I'll tell you a story about David if you tell me a story about this young man who's hogging your thoughts."

"Deal."

He listened to his mother talk about how she and her boyfriend (do you call a man his late fifties

"boyfriend"?) had tried to go ice skating last week and the dangers of possibly breaking hips in their old age. Steve smiled politely throughout and then, in exchange, talked about the amazing lasagna Bucky had cooked for them.

"Your story doesn't count," his mother informed him.

"What?"

"I already knew about that one."

"From who?"

"Sheila. She called me a soon as you left her bakery with that peach pie. You're going to have to tell me something else."

Steve knew if he didn't immediately comply, she'd once again break out the puppy dog eyes or find some other way to con him into giving up details, so it was just easier to give in. He told her about their first date with the pretentious hipsters at the coffee place instead. When he was finished, she leaned back in her chair to give him a thorough once-over. "Has he kissed you?"

This time, Steve did blush. "I'm not actually sure who started it."

"Has he more than kissed you?"

"Mom," Steve groaned.

"I'm just saying, I work at a hospital. I can get you some free condoms if you want them."

Steve leaned forward with a whine until the table caught his forehead. "Please don't tell me why you know where the free condoms are."

Tests of Patience and Other Character Traits

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we explore medical tests, matchmaking, and Wade Wilson. Oh my.

"Barnes! Psst, hey, Barnes!"

Bucky felt his forehead crease as he finished reminding his students how to borrow from bigger numbers for subtraction. They usually grasped new concepts okay, but it seemed the still-lingering long weekend of turkey and no school had erased most of the short-term memory. The hissing started just as he wrote 70 minus 13 on the board, and he ignored it.

Now, the hissing included whistling, clicking, and full-voiced renditions of his name, and—

"*Barnes!*"

"Okay," Bucky ground out, "try the next one and we'll practice together once you all try it. Be *right* back."

He stalked to the doorway to his classroom to find Wade Wilson standing in the hallway with one foot in the art room. He'd been surprised to find Steve out and a substitute teacher in his place, but even more surprised to meet the substitute teacher. Wilson'd rambled about his fondness for Georgia O'Keefe and chocolate pudding—like they were related—for ten minutes that morning. The only person who seemed even vaguely amused was Darcy.

"Wilson?" he asked, glancing back at his class.

"Look," the other man greeted with no preamble, "I am not saying anything is *wrong* with Rogers's very detailed and absolutely not problematic lesson plans that expect me to know all about color wheels and perspectives and fruit bowls, okay? That's not what I'm saying."

Bucky couldn't help but frown. "Okay . . ."

"But I need crayons. Extra crayons. Like, possibly eight billion crayons." When Bucky hesitated, he folded his hands together as if in prayer. "Please don't make me get down on my knees in the hallway because you're cute and people'll get the wrong idea."

"Uh," Bucky replied. He snuck a glance up and down the hallway to make sure no one overheard that—whatever-it-was. "I'll grab the bins I have."

"Thanks!" Wilson chirped, and flashed him a thumbs-up sign.

The whole morning repeated the same routine, more or less: Bucky instructed his class, Wilson popped out of the art room with a question (including one about what a woodchuck actually did if it could not chuck wood), Bucky felt an urge to bang his head against the door frame. When he grabbed Natasha at lunch and asked, she laughed.

"Don't try to understand Wade Wilson," she cautioned.

"What does that even mean?" Bucky poured himself a cup of coffee. His mind kept drifting back to Steve's absence; between that and Wilson's insanity, he felt drained.

"Wilson is what he is. The less energy you spend trying to categorize that, the better."

"But is he *okay*?" Bucky pressed. She frowned. "In the head? Because that is a lot of crazy, and—"

"Head-shrinking doctor types've been trying to figure that out for years." Bucky nearly leapt out of his skin, and when he spun around, Wilson stood right behind him, sipping out of a CapriSun.

"They're still trying to rule out adult ADD—or maybe it's ADHD, I don't know. It's got letters and they put me on drugs for it for a while, but I don't believe in performance enhancers."

Bucky watched as Natasha ducked stealthily out of the conversation. He almost shouted for her to stay, but Wilson stared him down. He felt cornered, even though there was plenty of room behind him. "I don't think that's what ADD drugs do," he finally said.

"The body is a temple. It'd be like spray-painting a booger on the Sphinx. Except I don't think the Sphinx has a nose, so you know, maybe you can't paint a booger on it. Maybe you'd need to paint bunny-ears? But paint's not 3D, so—"

"I have to go," Bucky told him, stepping away.

"—I guess you'd need some really big pipe cleaners as a start. Maybe *that's* what I can do with the kids after lunch . . . "

Bucky was pretty sure Wilson kept talking even after he left the room.

The kids went to specials after lunch, meaning that Bucky had a blissful forty-five minutes to sit in his room and prepare for activities later that week. His mind, however, had other ideas. He kept wondering where Steve was, and why Steve hadn't returned his quick *hope you're not sick* text message that morning. Worse, every time he started to focus again, he heard laughter trickling in from across the hall. His students were the ones with Wilson in the art room, meaning his students were the ones laughing.

He wondered how Steve would feel knowing that Wilson decimated his lesson plans. About fifteen minutes before specials were over, he decided to find out.

In the art room, all the kids were seated at tables, armed with crayons, colored pencils, markers, you name it—one of the girls even had watercolors and a water bottle to dip her brush into. As Bucky watched, they would draw something, sneak glances at each other, giggle or pull faces or snipe a little, and then jump right back into drawing.

Wilson himself was lying on the floor, his face twisted into a ridiculous expression. Henry Odinson, sitting opposite from Wilson, cackled and went back to his drawing. A drawing of—

"We're doing partner portraits!" Wilson announced. Every head in the room shot up, and Bucky smiled at his students. "Anybody done and wanna do Mister Barnes? C'mon, don't be shy, you might get extra credit if you throw in his rugged chin and those smoldering-hot eyes of—"

"That's okay," Bucky told them. They all immediately dipped their heads back to their projects. A couple of the kids were instructing their partners on how to make the pictures better: the color of a hair bow, the color of the *hair*, how to draw better shoes (Cassie peaked under the table to compare her drawing to Marco's actual feet). "Partner portraits," he repeated.

"Uh, *yeah*," Wilson said. He gestured toward the desk. "Rogers wanted self-portraits for these

guys, but then Brady or Bettina or whatever her name is—"

"Bailey?"

"Bailey, yeah, she asked why anybody'd want a picture of her. And I told her, hey, you know, you're always prettier or smarter or tougher in other people's eyes than your own eyes, and this one —" He pointed to Henry. "—asked what that meant, and I was like, 'Okay, you know what? Self-portraits are dumb, we're doing partner portraits, and then we can see how awesome we are in other people's eyes, and it'll be cool.'"

"Stop moving," Henry instructed.

"Then draw my riding-dragon," Wilson retorted, and Henry laughed.

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, but then he glanced over toward the nearest table. One of his shiest girls was showing the boy across from her how to add freckles with tiny little red crayon dots, Gia's watercolor portrait of Asher swirled together to turn her rendition of the large red birthmark on his cheek and neck into something feathery and beautiful, and Henry—

"What color's your dragon?" Henry asked.

"Uh, my dragon is the color of *awesome*," Wilson instructed.

—was voluntarily interacting with a teacher in a healthy way.

"You sure you don't want a portrait?" Wilson asked. Henry was coloring his dragon in black and red checkerboard. "Gigi—"

Gia laughed. "That's not right!" she announced.

"—is pretty good. I'm gonna e-mail Rogers later, tell him to watch out for that one. We're gonna see her in an art museum someday. Right, Ash?"

Asher blushed.

"Stop *moving*," Henry complained. Wilson stuck his tongue out.

Bucky, for once, was a little speechless.

He also did not complain about Wilson for the rest of the day.

Darcy cracked her knuckles as she opened a new email. Selecting the school-wide mailing list, she prepped the text window with obnoxious green and red font colors if for no other reason than to drive some of the more crotchety staff members up the wall.

Like her boss, who, without even looking, Darcy could feel glaring her down from his office doorway. "You know you're going to need to make that school-appropriate, right?" Fury asked.

She spun in her chair and gave him a look of insult. "When am I ever not school-appropriate?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her but didn't verbally answer her question. "I've got a meeting up at the board for the rest of the afternoon."

"Sucks to be you."

The corners of his mouth twitched as he closed his office door behind him and walked toward her desk. "Text me if something important goes down."

"Are we using my definition of 'important,' or yours? Because it's that time of the year where Romanoff comes in and asks me if I can help teach the dance unit, and I find that pretty frakking important—"

"My definition," he said before he walked about the office in a swirl of black overcoat.

Darcy checked around for tiny humans. Since there weren't any around her for the moment, she pulled open her secret stash drawer and grabbed a mini candy cane—the smaller ones were easy to hide whole in her mouth if a kid came by.

She flexed her fingers and started back to work on her email, addressing it as a chance to celebrate "your choice of winter holiday here." Because she expected shit from parents about labeling things with words like *Christmas* or *Santa*. She didn't agree with it, but she expected it. The first time she got grief from staff members about it, she thought she was being punk'd, because seriously? It's called Secret Santa; that is the actual name of the game.

As she typed, she laid out the rules: four small gifts for Monday through Thursday, each not costing more than two dollars, and one final gift costing more than ten. It sucked living on a school employee's budget, but they made up for it with some awesome creativity. Darcy made sure to bold, italicize, and underline a note to Stark that he was to follow the budget's rules. Like it would do any good.

She attached the traditional form for people to fill out including their names, food allergies, favorite little knickknacks, etc. After adding a terribly annoying gif of dancing snowmen, she went ahead and sent it out. The staff had exactly one week to get forms back into her, and then she would have the honors of pairing people off to play Saint Nick. It sucked that she couldn't participate herself since she knew who everyone had, but there was always the benefit of people trying to bribe her before names were assigned to get someone special—and the bribes to learn the name of the mysterious benefactor once the gifts started rolling in. And for now, that appeased Darcy. Besides, if she ever wanted fresh baked goods, she just had to go next door to Jane's and pout.

The first to offer her a bribe was Sitwell, and it took all of two minutes before he came out of his cave where he did God-knows-what to try and bribe her with a can of Diet Coke. "Seriously?" she asked. "Do you know what aspartame does to a brain? No."

"I have chocolate in my office."

She spun her chair to face him and crossed her arms under her chest. "I'm listening."

"Can you give me to Phil again?"

"You do realize it's called *Secret* Santa, right?"

Sitwell shrugged her off. "He got me these little bottles of hot sauce two years ago, and I can't find them anywhere else."

"Dude, it's called the internet."

"I tried that," the vice-principal whined. "But seriously, they're nowhere to be found."

"Why don't you just ask him?"

He shook his head. "He told me it was a secret. Maybe it was something Barton cooked up."

Darcy scrunched up her face. "Okay, I'm going to need you to stop talking about little bottles of Barton's secret sauce, because my brain is going nowhere good."

"Can you please just let Phil be my Secret Santa again?"

"Ugh, for the images you just put in my head, I should make the chief lunch lady your Secret Santa."

It was Sitwell's turn to grimace. "She smells like dead cats. Please don't do that to me."

"And yet you eat her tater tots like they're manna from heaven." He shrugged before walking off. "Hey! Where's my chocolate?"

"Not until I see evidence that Phil is buying presents for me," he said before he shut himself off back in his cave.

"Probably isn't even good chocolate," she muttered to herself, but knowing his foodie tendencies, that was probably a lie.

Nat: *Tell your boyfriend he's late for team meeting and his firm and shapely ass should've been in the library five minutes ago.*

Bucky rolled his eyes at the text before leaning back in his chair to look across the hall. The light was still on in Steve's room. He'd seen the art teacher twenty minutes ago when he'd walked his kids out to the bus, but didn't stay and talk because he knew about the monthly meeting the specials teachers were about to head into.

He stood and slipped his cell phone into his pocket before walking across the hall. Bucky looked in the window next to the door to see Steve standing in front of his desk, unmoving. He knocked on the door, but Steve didn't acknowledge him, so Bucky let himself into the room.

"Steve?" The man flinched and spun. It took his eyes a second to focus on Bucky, and he shook his head as if he were lost standing in his own classroom, his face tight with emotions that Bucky found unsettling. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm—" His words broke off as he saw the clock over his door. "I'm late."

He tried to breeze out of the room, but Bucky snagged him by the arm and pulled him to a stop. "Steve, what's wrong?" he asked quietly. The art teacher's mouth opened to say something, but he closed it back up and just shook his head. Bucky pulled two chairs down from the table next to them, shoved Steve into one and then took the other after he shut the door to the classroom. "What's wrong?" he repeated.

"You know how I was out a few days ago? For my doctor's appointment?"

Bucky snorted. "I don't think I can repress the memories of Wade Wilson that quickly, although I'm actively trying."

Steve nodded without a hint of a smile. "The doc's office just called me back with some test results. My white blood cells were a higher than normal."

Science was not one of Bucky's strong suits. He remembered something about there being different

colors of blood cells but couldn't tell you what they meant or how many different kinds there were. "You're going to have to clue me in here."

"Remember how I said I was a sick and scrawny kid?"

Bucky nodded. "Still don't believe it, but yeah, I remember."

Steve licked his lips in his hesitation before he confessed, "I had leukemia."

The impact of the words caused Bucky to lean back in his chair a bit. He blinked as he looked up and down the frame of the man in front of him. The incredibly fit, extremely healthy looking man. "What?"

"When I was twelve, I started getting sick all of the time, had bruises everywhere, was tired no matter how much sleep I got. Mom took me to the doctor, and after a couple of months of tests, they diagnosed me." He let out a bitter huff of air. "Could've been sooner but the docs thought my mom was being an over-stressed, know-it-all of a nurse, single mother."

"Assholes."

Steve nodded. "So that started the treatments and the constant doctor visits and the stay in the hospital. I was fourteen when I got a clean bill of health, but I still have to go back and get tests done once a year."

"And the results this year?"

The man shrugged. "The doc told me it could be nothing. I might be getting ready to come down with a cold. But I have to go get more blood drawn, and maybe some more scans depending on what the new results say."

"So it could be nothing?" Bucky asked, trying to find the silver lining. It didn't work because Steve's shoulders slumped at the words and looked down at his hands. "Hey," he said as he knocked his knee against Steve's. He waited until blue eyes rose to meet his. "It could be nothing."

"It could be my worst nightmare," Steve whispered.

The sentence hit Bucky like a ton of bricks, and he had no clue how to react. Like almost everyone else, he'd lost a family member to cancer, but it was his Uncle Jack who lived three states away and only came around once every few Christmases.

He wanted to yell and fight. This thing with him and Steve—this new, happy, great thing—was being threatened. And, yeah, that sucked, but the look on Steve's face? The combination of fear, pain, horrible memories, and more fear? So much worse. Not that Bucky got to see it for very long, because the man threw up an invisible shield and slid a neutral mask into place.

"I've got a meeting," Steve said as he moved to stand.

"Phil won't give two shits."

"Phil doesn't know," Steve responded quietly, halfway to the door. He paused and turned. "Other than Fury, you're the only one I've told about my history."

Again, Bucky didn't know what to do with this piece of news. He let his body take over and, as a result, rose and came to stand in front of Steve. He placed his hands on either side of the man's face before placing a kiss at the corner of his mouth and resting his forehead against his. Steve

tensed initially at the contact, but Bucky didn't relent. A few seconds later, he was rewarded for his persistence when Steve's hands came to rest on his hips and the man leaned slightly into the contact.

"What do you need?" Bucky asked.

"For this not to be cancer."

Bucky smiled. "If I could pull that off, I would in a heartbeat. But what can I do?"

Steve rolled his lips before answering, "I have to call my mom." Bucky looked up into blue eyes and for the first time saw the faintest hint of wetness. "She knew I was getting results back today. And she's going to start calling me if I don't do it first, and that'll make things so much worse."

"What can I do?" Bucky repeated.

Steve shook his head and leaned away, sniffing and clearing his throat. "You don't have to do anything."

"But I want to." The words were instinctual, a polite conversational reply embedded into Bucky's brain and given on impulse. But that didn't mean they weren't true.

The art teacher's lips pursed as he debated how much more to let Bucky in. "Stay in here while I call her?"

"Of course."

Steve moved around Bucky to go to his desk where his cell phone rested. He picked up the device and sat with a weary sigh. Bucky walked around the desk and leaned back to sit on the edge of it, his leg once again coming into contact with Steve's.

It took a few seconds of staring at the screen before Steve gathered the courage to send the call through. Bucky heard a few rings before a voice sounded on the other end of the line.

"You busy?" Steve asked. If Bucky knew from the tone of his voice that he was trying to put on a brave face, surely his mother would recognize it. And judging by the way his face fell, she had. Bucky bumped his leg against Steve's again and gave him a small smile when Steve looked up.

"Got my test results back."

"Have you seen Doctor Banner?"

Natasha turned to quirk an eyebrow at May Parker. "No," she answered, her breath coming out in a puff in the December air. "It's early release—the afternoon kindergarten and pre-school classes had a get-out-of-jail-free-day."

"Actually, I think only the teachers feel that way. The students were pretty sad they would have to stay home all day today." May paused to lean in so the kids around them who were boarding the buses to go home wouldn't hear. "Although, between you and me, I'm thrilled I get a week off from watching Jeffrey Andrews spend every second of my class with his finger up his nose."

Natasha gave a barely-perceptible smirk before glaring down a third grader who was trying to trip her classmates. "Why do you need to talk to Bruce?"

A look crossed May's face that piqued Natasha's interest. She'd seen that look before; May had

worn it when discussing plans for, among other things, both Coulson's and Stark's bachelor parties. Because she was the one who planned them. Natasha wasn't ashamed to admit that she wanted to be May Parker someday. Maybe not with the triangles and drumsticks in her classroom, but definitely someone with so much badassness.

"Well, the girls and I were talking at the spa. Did you know he's straight?" she whispered.

Natasha fought to keep the corners of her mouth from twitching. "I did, actually."

"Well, what do you know. I've never heard about him dating anyone—male or female."

"Despite what Darcy now believes, it isn't a requirement to be gay if you're male and employed at our school."

"Could've fooled me," May muttered before bending over to pick up a glove a passing fourth grader dropped. "Anyway, the girls and I were thinking about setting him up with someone. What do you think?"

"Umm," Natasha replied as she felt her eyes grow a bit wide. "Are you sure he'd be okay with that? I mean, I don't think he's dated anyone since his wife."

May's mouth pursed into a tight line. "I know how hard it can be to get back out on the dating scene after you lose a spouse, but I think it could be good for him. Not that there isn't wrong with sticking his nose in one science journal after another, but those aren't going to keep him warm at night." May gave her a close look. "You know something the rest of us girls don't know?"

Natasha's eyebrows rose slightly. "No." May studied her for a moment more, and Natasha felt her chest swell and chin rise ever so slightly under the scrutiny. Normally, Natasha had no issues with lying, but this was May Parker, whom she considered one of three surrogate mothers in her life.

The music teacher shrugged. "In that case, we need to start scouting for blind date potentials. What do you think about Mindy Lane's mom? She seems reasonably sane."

Natasha shook her head while they waved bye to the students on the departing buses. "No, he won't date a student's mom."

"She's not his student anymore." May's head whipped around to look at her again. "And how do you know that?"

She shrugged. "He told me about it. His friend at another school—Hank something-or-other—went out a few times with student's mother, and it was a nightmare. He's not going to repeat those mistakes."

"Well, if you know anyone else, let us know. Maybe another teacher? Think he'd be interested in anyone here?"

Natasha faked a sneeze to buy herself some time. "Maybe. Have anyone in mind?"

"Monica showed some interest," May informed her as she turned and the pair of them started to head back into the school behind a perpetually-bickering Tony, Phil, and Steve.

She tried to think about the speech therapist on a date with Bruce and had trouble forming the idea. She couldn't think of anything the two really had in common. But it wasn't like she had room to judge, since the only thing she had in common with the man was a history of loss. Maybe she should encourage the notion.

May checked her watch. "I have to get to Tony's training. When do you go?"

"I'm in the last group. How did you manage to get put so early on the schedule?"

"Bribed him with homemade salsa."

Natasha smiled. "Sounds about right."

"See you tomorrow," May told her as she made her way to the stairs to go up to the lab.

Natasha knew she should turn left and start the process of bleaching down the equipment she'd used in class today, but instead she turned right and let her feet guide her to Bruce's room at the end of the front hall. He was laying out large wooden beads for something his students would be doing the next day and didn't notice her presence until she'd been standing there for almost a whole minute. Then, he jolted slightly.

"Hey," he greeted with a hint of a smile before he slid into a look of slight panic. "Oh, am I late? Are we supposed to be in the lab already?"

"No, you still have two hours." She tilted her head and tried to decide how much she should warn him about the conversation she'd just had with May. "If anyone asks, you told me that you don't date students' parents because your buddy Hank did it once and it was a mess."

Bruce's eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Hank's never dated a student's parent."

"Yeah, but they don't know that."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Don't worry about it," she told him as she turned and headed for the door.

"Natasha," he called out in a quiet voice. It wasn't the same tone he used when saying her name in near-reverence in her own ear, but it still made her breath catch. She spun slowly on her toe to face him once more, fighting to keep her face neutral. "Everything okay?" he asked.

She forced a smile. "Fine."

He returned the grin. "Good. See you up in the lab."

"Okay, quick, before he gets here: theories on the big guy's strut?"

Group down-time at school tended to be super-rare, given all the various side-duties they all had (busses and lunches and recess, oh my!). But since the district, in its infinite wisdom, was rolling out brand-new attendance and grade book software starting the first of the year, and since only the intrepid information technology efforts at the individual schools were tasked with *training* people on it, it meant that they had a rare mid-week early dismissal. A rare, delightful mid-week early dismissal where Tony'd gotten to create a very specific chart of teachers and trainings that ended with, you guessed it, all his favorite people in the last time slot.

Well, and Coulson. He and Barton carpooled every day, no way to really escape that fate.

"Strut?" Clint asked. He was eating—

"Did you bring pudding into my lab?"

He shrugged. "I'm hungry."

"Not in my lab, you're not." Tony crossed the room and physically pushed Clint, who'd been standing over the garbage can as he unpeeled the lid to his pudding, back out the door. "Pudding's the gateway drug to other, stickier, less-pleasant substances that are forever lodged in my keyboards and do *not* make that dirty."

Clint's smirk only grew. "After what we've done leaning over my computer, pudding's the least of your—"

"I will dig a Pentium II out of the storage closet," Tony retorted, pointing a finger at the grinning fifth-grade teacher. "256 glorious kilobytes of RAM. Built-in modem. A 1996 wet dream." He waited until Clint rolled his eyes to continue. "And anyway, this isn't about you ruining the sanctity of one of the new Dells I smuggled in for you since you'd pouted nicely. This is about Bruce."

"Yeah, what do you mean by strut, anyway?" Clint asked around his plastic spoon.

"I mean *strut*," Tony repeated. Clint raised an eyebrow. "You know. Strut. *The* strut. The peacock-on-display, lizard-with-the-neck-thing, mating-duck-call *strut*."

Clint's brow furrowed. "I don't—"

"He thinks Bruce is having sex," Coulson said from where he was already checking his e-mail at one of the computers.

Tony sighed. "It should personally shame you that your sexless husband—"

"Only since six-thirty this morning," Coulson interrupted.

"—understood that and you didn't."

"You think Bruce's getting laid?" Clint asked, still half-frowning. "Because you know, I kinda wondered, but Phil said I was crazy." He glanced over his shoulder. "Who's crazy now?"

"Between the two of you?" Phil returned.

"Remember only one of us can get you laid."

"And one of us," Tony put in, "can change your password to a completely random string of numbers and letters, and then smile while you suffer."

Phil rolled his eyes. "Leave Bruce alone."

"Uh, not if he's secretly getting laid," Clint said, and turned back to Tony. "But, I mean, okay. Like I said, I suspected, but I couldn't put my finger on why."

"It's the strut," Tony informed him. He leaned his shoulder against the computer lab doorway and shrugged. "I've known Bruce for a long time, right? Hunched over, quiet, keeps to himself, never rocks the boat until you piss him off, et cetera, et cetera." He waved a hand. "But lately, especially in the last couple weeks, he's like singing-in-the-rain, tiptoe-through-the-tulips upbeat. He was humming this morning."

"Everybody hums," Clint returned.

"Uh, pretty sure it was Nikki Minaj's 'Starships,' buddy." Clint frowned at that, so Tony pressed on. "He's smiling. Laughing. Almost upbeat. Meaning that someone is getting the D."

Coulson's head lifted at that, and both members of the world's weirdest marriage stared at him. "Never call it that again," they said in unison.

"What's who doing, now?" a new voice asked, and Tony snapped his fingers as Natasha walked up. She raised her eyebrows at Clint and his devil-pudding, who shrugged.

Meanwhile, he was pretty sure Coulson muttered for her to walk away while she still could, but he ignored it to point at her. "You've got a woman's intuition, right? All that—womanly knowledge that women have?"

"I want to watch her kill you," Clint decided, and stepped out of the direct line between Tony and Natasha.

"I'm not going to pretend I know what you're talking about," Natasha said, crossing her arms.

Tony ignored her, and Clint's snickering. "Do you, being a woman with womanly intuition and womanly knowledge, think the good Doctor Banner is getting some sweet lady loving?"

"You're so going to get murdered," Clint muttered.

But Natasha—scary, sharp-eyed, usually super-intense Natasha—just blinked at him. "What?" she asked.

"Let's take all the evidence together like the last five minutes of a *CSI* episode," Tony said. "I think he's getting some of that loving spoonful. Clint thinks he's getting some afternoon delight. Coulson —"

Coulson glanced over at him.

"Well, Coulson doesn't count," he said with a wave of his hand, "he was probably a Taylor Swift-style virgin when he met Barton." Coulson rolled his eyes. "And," Tony pressed, "you were the three people most recently with him. Did you ply him with non-alcoholic eggnog and see if you get his lips flapping?"

Clint scoffed. "You've met the family, remember? The only sex life that gets discussed with them is *ours*."

Tony shuddered. "Still super-disturbing. You know that, right?"

Natasha smiled, small but sharp. "This from the man who hid in the bathroom to avoid talking about babies with his in-laws." When he turned on her, she shrugged. "I have my ways of getting information."

"I could literally buy her the entire inventory of Zappas right now and yet Pepper still barter with you over a pair of red heels." Natasha's smile turned into an out-and-out smirk. "Okay, well, what about you?" he asked her. "You and Bruce, you camped out in the Day's Inn or whatever, right? Any long, personal conversations about potential sexual partners on the drive?"

Natasha shook her head. "We were too busy talking about Clint and Phil's sex life," she said.

Coulson's lips twitched up into something that, on a normal person, might've actually qualified as a smile. "Hopefully, one or both of you can use that information in your personal lives."

"If I haven't already," Natasha returned.

Tony scowled at them and held up his hands. "Okay, no. The creepy in-law fascination with Barton's naked ass—"

"It's a fantastic ass," Clint pointed out.

"No, it's more awe-inspiring than fantastic," Phil noted.

"—is bad enough, I don't want to think about that information being used on whatever nubile nerdy thing that Bruce's ba—"

"What's Bruce doing?" Bruce's voice asked, and Tony nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the man himself coming down the hallway. Worse, behind him were Pepper, Steve, and the new guy, each of them looking one-part curious and one-part confused. And suspicious, actually, but that was mostly from Pepper.

Clint smirked. "Yeah, what *is* Bruce doing?" he asked, all eyebrow-waggle and barely-contained evil.

"Pentium II," Tony reminded him. "Windows 95, Lotus 1-2-3, and if you're really well-behaved, KidPix."

"Hey, I loved KidPix," Bucky said. Steve grinned at him. God, they were actively disgusting. What's worse, he'd probably used KidPix in elementary school, making him—

"Are you actually twelve?" Tony demanded, and Bucky laughed a little. "Okay, good, the gang's all here and everything, let's get this show on the road." He stepped out of the computer lab doorway, pausing briefly only to snatch Clint's empty pudding cup and throw it away before he could plant it somewhere in the lab. "The sooner we're out, the sooner the bravest of you can order from Madame Chang's with me and eat General Tso's chicken in the teacher's lounge."

Pepper frowned. "I hate that place," she said for about the eighty-seventh time since they started dating.

"You hate the after-effects," Bruce muttered, and Pepper winked at him a little as she trailed into the lab.

Somehow, Bruce ended up the last in the group, all unassuming and back to his normal self after three days of prolonged and, frankly, glorious strutting. Tony threw an arm around him as they slid into the lab.

Bruce sent him a puzzled look. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Just that I'm onto you," Tony informed him as login chimes echoed around him. "I am onto you like— Well, I'll come up with a simile later. I'm just onto you, is all."

And Bruce—quiet, hunched-over, best friend for life Bruce Banner—smiled at him in a way so enigmatic, Tony actually blinked. "Are you sure about that?" he asked, and then slipped away.

Tony stared after him for a couple seconds, open-mouthed and a little gaping. Seriously, it took until he, Clint, and Natasha were all laughing at something together for Tony to really recover.

But when he did, he grinned.

Challenge accepted.

"Come on, you had to love the guys with the arms the size of tree trunks!" Bucky encouraged, and Steve let a smile nudge at the corners of his mouth.

The Starbucks a few blocks from the movie theater was fairly empty for 9:30 on a Saturday night, and Steve was grateful for that. Even after a few days of letting the dust settle, he felt off-balance and uneasy. On Friday, one of the second-graders had retold him the story of Chicken Little, and Steve spent the rest of the day imagining himself like that bird: convinced the sky was falling.

Then, he'd met Bucky outside the movie theater for the latest "fast cars driven by attractive men" film in the franchise, and he forgot about the falling sky. At least, for two hours of explosions, gunfire, and Bucky's hand finding his and holding on.

He remembered high school dates with sweaty-palmed hand-holding. None of them ever felt like the person next to him was helping to buttress the sky.

Bucky nudged his foot under the table, and Steve jerked his head up. "I can't do the strong, silent, sad thing," he said, his fingers flexing around his paper cup. "Maybe it's the whole 'the four horsewomen are always hell-bent on discussing our feelings' thing, but I'm going to be bad at this."

Steve surrendered to a tiny chuckle, even if his chest felt tighter from Bucky's honest, open-faced admission. "Horsewomen?" he repeated.

"The legion of sisters."

"Named Pestilence, War, Death, and Famine?" Steve asked, hearing the amusement in his own tone.

Bucky laughed. "I need to make them t-shirts," he decided. Steve smiled at him. "They were horrible at Thanksgiving, by the way. They pretty much pinned me to the wall after Rebecca—she's the youngest, she's living with my folks right now—caught me texting you. I had to hide my phone for the rest of the weekend."

Despite himself, Steve finally laughed, causing the expression of annoyance to drop right off Bucky's face.

"What?" Bucky demanded.

"Nothing," Steve lied, and sipped his coffee.

"No, see, this is date three. No more dodging softball questions when I can clearly tell you're lying." Steve chuckled again, but the sound failed when he realized how intently Bucky was looking at him. He swallowed his coffee without tasting it. "What?"

Steve shook his head.

"I can be persistent," Bucky warned.

"It's nothing."

"Except for the fact that you're a half-second from blushing and can't look at me," Bucky observed. Steve felt his cheeks flare red against his will. "I bought your coffee," the other man pressed.

At least Steve could still level him a skeptical look. "After I tried to pay for it myself."

"You bought the movie tickets."

"You cooked, last time."

"My cooking was nothing compared to that pie." Bucky leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I have dreams about that pie." Steve pressed his lips together to keep from laughing, and Bucky nudged his foot under the table. "Not sexy spoon rest dreams. You really *are* worse than Tony, you know that?"

Steve shook his head. "You opened yourself up, I just took it," he defended. Bucky's eyebrows shot up in one swift, Tony-like swoop, and after a few beats, Steve realized the possible innuendo. He dipped his head to his coffee, and Bucky burst out laughing.

He also kept his foot pressed against Steve's under the table. Steve had no intention of complaining about that.

After they finished their coffee, complete with Bucky complaining for a full twenty minutes about Wade Wilson and Steve laughing hard enough his stomach hurt, they emerged into the cold winter night. It was late and dark, the sidewalks practically empty thanks to the time and the cold, and Steve didn't really think about what he was doing until after his fingers found Bucky's again. Bucky looked momentarily surprised, but then, he leaned in closer.

"They'd like you," he said after a few minutes of walking silently, and Steve glanced over. "The Four Horsewomen," he clarified. "I didn't tell them, because I was pissed about them taking my cell phone and treating me like I was twelve again—"

"They took your phone?"

Bucky dismissed it with a hand. "They've always been critical of anyone I dated, before or after I came out to them. But I think they'd like you."

Something soft flickered across Bucky's expression then, and Steve's whole chest and belly felt tighter for it. He thought about the comment from the coffee shop about Bucky being bad at strong-and-silent, and then about Bucky's kindness in his classroom earlier that week. He remembered Bucky crowding into his space and holding onto him.

He hadn't realized until now how badly he'd needed someone to touch him right then.

He cast his eyes at the sea of cars in the movie theater parking lot instead of falling into Bucky's steady gaze. "My mom asked me about you," he said after a few more seconds. "Sheila told her about the pie, and she needled. I think she wanted some solidarity, since we're both dating at the same time, but I—" He shrugged and glanced back at Bucky. "It's sometimes nice to have something that's just yours."

Bucky tugged his hand, and Steve realized after stopping that they were already at Bucky's car, parked a few rows from Steve's. Bucky watched him for a second, still holding on, and then released his grip to step forward. His hands found Steve's sides; even over the coat, Steve imagined the shape of his fingers, and heat despite the cold.

"And other things, you can share," Bucky said. "At least, with me."

Steve never figured out who started their first kiss, but he knew before it happened that he'd be responsible for this one, invading Bucky's personal space with a half-step, finding his neck with a hand, and then kissing him. He kissed him thinking of the last week of his life: the day of testing when he wrote and re-wrote a text message to Bucky a hundred times; the day of the results and Bucky's proximity helping to keep him from falling apart; Chicken Little and his falling sky, and

Bucky helping to prop it back up. All those emotions piled together and then poured out into the kiss, guided his fingers into Bucky's hair while Bucky's hands opened and then slipped into his coat, and coaxed a hungry noise out of one or both of them.

He only discovered that they'd stumbled up against Bucky's car in the dark, Bucky pressed to the driver's side and Steve pinning him there, when they broke away panting. Bucky's full lips looked fuller and flushed in the artificial parking lot light; his hair stood up at angles from where Steve'd dragged fingers through it.

Steve tried, desperately, to find the right words. In the end, all he could manage was a whispered, "Thanks."

He knew his voice sounded sincere, but from the way Bucky's eyebrows raised, he thought maybe it was too sincere. Bucky's fingers flexed against his shirt, fingernails pressing into his skin, and Steve fought hard against his urge to close his eyes and kiss him again.

"Do me a favor," Bucky breathed, and Steve immediately met his eyes. "Stop acting like all this is a Herculean effort. Being here for you, caring about what happens, it's—" He paused for a second, almost as though the words escaped. "I'm allowed to like the hell out of you," he finally said. "Unless that's a problem."

"That will never be a problem," Steve said immediately. Bucky smiled at the sincerity, this time, so Steve pressed close and kissed him again.

Attack of the Secret Santas

Chapter Summary

It's the last week of class before winter break, which means it's time for holiday festivities and Secret Santa gift exchanges.

"Darcy, come on, you have *got* to be kidding me," Monica Rambeau grumbled, the Secret Santa e-mail she'd printed out dangling from her frankly terrifying hands. Darcy could see the lunch lady's name listed as Monica's assigned beneficiary—not that she didn't already know.

Darcy looked up from her computer and tried not to cringe. Monica's frown could kill a lesser woman at thirty paces. "Them's the breaks, Mon."

"And I don't get any say in changing this?"

"Do you know what'd happen if I changed pairings every time somebody asked? Chaos! Children of the barricades not lasting the night—"

"Darcy."

"—fornication with farm animals, literally *every* horrible thing the Westboro Baptist Church believes coming true right there in the playground, and—"

"*Darcy*," Monica snapped, and Darcy jerked right out of her rant. She tried not to flinch under Monica's truly evil glare. "Every year, I get either Old Miss Howard, or I end up with *her*."

Darcy forced a smile. "She's not even that bad, once you get past the whole dead cat smell." Monica's eyes narrowed. "Sitwell loves her tater tots?"

"You and Sitwell are gonna be tater tots if this happens again next year," Monica threatened.

Darcy considered pointing out how bad her Cajun was showing, but decided she also wanted to live to see the end of the school day.

"Have you, uhm, ever had a friend with benefits?" Bruce asked, and Tony sputtered milkshake all over the table.

Bruce forgot exactly how the milkshake tradition started, but now, it felt more like muscle memory than conscious effort: attend a meeting, climb in one of their cars, drive to the diner, argue over milkshakes. The waitress, Meredith, never asked for their orders, anymore, just called them out to the kitchen as soon as Bruce and Tony walked in; she never brought over a menu, even on the nights Tony announced he planned on ordering. Then again, Tony only ever ordered chili fries or a slice of cherry pie (jokes about the song included), so a menu was mostly just pretext.

Bruce slid tonight's batch of fries away from Tony's mess and helped himself to a fry. Tony stared at him. "You have milkshake in your goatee," Bruce pointed out.

"You have a friend you're getting *benefits* from," Tony retorted, and Bruce felt the tips of his ears

redde

Tony grabbed a handful of napkins, then, leaving Bruce to poke his spoon in his strawberry shake and stay appropriately quiet. He'd thought a lot about this conversation over the last few days, building up his willpower to actually tell Tony. His relationship with Natasha—whatever label it deserved—still felt private, a secret he needed to hold close to his chest. Natasha certainly thought the same; Bruce'd spent the last week and a half avoiding May Parker's very pointed questions about what he looked for in a woman, a sure sign Natasha'd not mentioned anything about—

About what, exactly?

Their occasional nights of dinner and crappy television? Their *less* frequent nights sleeping together? Well, less frequent until Thanksgiving, when they'd showed up late with a story about the hotel room shower not working properly.

The only trouble, really, had been their unwillingness to climb out of the bed.

"Bruce," Tony said, and Bruce lifted his eyes to see his friend staring at him. "Is this an actual question? Like, are you actually asking me, in words, for advice because you are regularly sleeping with someone of the fairer sex?" He paused. "Or less-fair sex, no judgment here."

Bruce huffed a laugh and shook his head. "Fairer sex," he promised. Tony lifted an eyebrow. "Being widowed doesn't change your sexual proclivities, Tony."

"Years of celibacy might, you never know."

"And you certainly wouldn't know, given that the longest you've been celibate is— How long did Pepper make you sleep on the couch last year?"

"Three horrible days. And once again, in my defense, she needed the new car, she just didn't *know* she needed it and it was a pretty expensive not-your-birthday-or-our-anniversary present." Bruce shook his head and reached for his straw, but Tony kept staring him down. "So. Friend. Benefits. She have a name?"

"No," Bruce immediately answered.

"How does that work, then? I mean, I'm sure you could go with just the usual string of curses in bed, but I'd think you'd want something to yell when—"

"Tony."

"Sorry, sorry," Tony acquiesced, holding up his hands. Bruce expected he'd immediately dive back into his monologue, too, but he fell quiet. Bruce watched him pick at his chili fries, then at his shake; he practically quivered in anticipation.

After all, in all their years of friendship, the closest Bruce'd come to a relationship was a handful of unsuccessful blind dates.

He sighed and abandoned his milkshake. "I don't know how this works," he admitted. Tony raised his eyebrows, and Bruce responded by shrugging. "With Betty, I— We were friends first, absolutely, but I always knew that I wanted to be in a relationship with her. We spent months almost-dating before we kissed, and it was never—"

"Purely a romp in the sack for the sake of sack-romping?" Tony offered when the words refused to cooperate.

Bruce narrowed his eyes across the table. "Uncertain," he corrected. Tony shrugged and nabbed another fry. "I thought I could just have sex," Bruce continued after a few seconds of watching Tony suck chili off his thumb. "It felt easy to separate out the two things, the friendship and the sexual element. And it's not like, if the sex stopped tomorrow, I'd want our friendship to end. I'm—fond of her, I guess." He caught the amused twitch of Tony's lips and promptly ignored it. "But I'm starting to think that I—"

"Have feelings?" Tony interjected. Bruce cast his eyes at the tabletop. "No, seriously, that's the whole point of this, isn't it? Big bad Bruce Banner thought maybe he could just screw a girl and like it but forgot that he's actually the most feeling-filled guy on the entire planet?" Against all odds, Bruce found the strength to roll his eyes. "No, see, you think I'm kidding," Tony pressed, "but that's the thing about you: you're brimming with emotions. You can't flick it off like a switch. At least, not for this." He shook his head. "And lemme tell you, that sucks."

"This from the happily-married man," Bruce pointed out wryly.

"Uh, yeah, the happily-married man who probably would've fucked-and-run on his wife except for the part where he found out too late that he'd left his feelings-switch in the 'on' position." Bruce snorted half a laugh and returned to stirring his milkshake. Tony stared him down. "What do you want from her?" he asked.

"Tony—"

"No, seriously, that's the question you ask when an F-W-B situation turns all sticky. Trust me, I've had, like, eight hundred of them, I know how this works." Bruce considered for a moment pointing out that one-night stands didn't ordinarily count as friends-with-benefits encounters, but decided against it. "You look yourself in the eye—in a mirror, of course—and you ask, 'What do I want out of this chick?' And if the answer's that you want an endless series of no-strings-attached sexytimes bad enough that you can turn off the feelings, then you're golden. And if you can't—"

Tony paused and cast his eyes across the table. Bruce wet his lips and, for reasons he didn't quite understand, swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat.

"—then you either tell her that, or you quit cold turkey. 'Cause if you don't, the feelings'll just get worse, and you'll hurt." Tony kicked him lightly under the table. "And since I hate when you're even a little hurt, that's not allowed to happen."

Bruce tried to bite down on the edges of a warm, uninvited little smile. "I'm glad this all circles back to your needs," he commented.

"Doesn't everything?" Tony asked, and Bruce finally surrendered to a laugh.

A half-hour later, Tony swung his car into an empty parking spot next to Bruce's car and killed the engine. Bruce started to thank him—for the milkshake (because Tony always paid) and the companionship, mostly—but Tony interrupted by saying, "Hey." When Bruce glanced at him, the other man's face was serious. "For what it's worth—which, you know, is maybe nothing, given that I give 'emotionally stunted' a whole new meaning and everything—I'm proud of you."

Bruce frowned. "Proud?" he echoed.

"Yeah," Tony replied. He lifted his shoulders in a loose shrug. "Back when I met you— Hell, no, I'll take that back. Six months ago, I never could've dreamed that you'd say to me, 'Hey, I'm sleeping with somebody on the regular, how do I handle this?'" Bruce shook his head, but Tony reached across the console and elbowed him. When Bruce raised his eyes, they stared at each other

in the dim glow of the parking lot lights. "It's pretty big, and pretty awesome."

Bruce allowed a tiny chuckle to escape the back of his throat. "It's just sex, Tony."

"For ninety-nine percent of humans? Sure, yeah." Tony's eyes met his again, and Bruce looked away. "But not for you."

He let Bruce climb out of the car, then, not another word about it, and Bruce stood in the December cold and watched him zip away into the night. He drove home in silence, thinking less about Natasha and more whether Tony was right: whether the bolus of confusion sitting in his stomach was a symptom of something bigger, or a step in the right direction.

It was after he changed into his pajamas and settled into bed with a book that his cell phone chimed.

Tony Stark: *by the way, I gave you a pass because of the whole "emotionally compromising conversation" thing, but starting tomorrow I reserve the right to start needling you about who the hell is getting up-close-and-personal with little Banner.*

Bruce cringed. *Don't ever call my genitalia the 'little Banner' again, Tony.*

fine, then, the big Banner. point is: you're on notice.

Despite his best efforts, Bruce smiled. *Goodnight, Tony*, he replied, and returned his phone to the bedside table.

"Give me a *clue*," Peter pled.

"Nope," Darcy replied, her feet up on her desk and a frankly delicious paper cup of hot chocolate hanging from her fingers. Peter reached for it, but she leaned back. He jerked his hand away in fear that he might touch her in inappropriate places. (He was cute. She'd let him live if he did.)

"I brought you hot chocolate!"

"The instructions clearly state that I cannot be bribed."

"And everybody, including Aunt May, says that you can."

"Mmm," Darcy returned, sipping her hot chocolate. May'd brought her some fantastic chocolate-covered pretzels the day before, trying to figure out who'd purchased the CD of world music for her. As if it could've come from anyone *but* Bruce Banner.

"Darcy," Peter whined, "the note said they'd 'put hair on my chest.'"

"You are the only person in the world who'd complain about five days of free booze," Darcy told him, and shooed him away with a flick of her wrist.

"I'm going to murder Darcy," Bucky sighed.

"No, you're not," Natasha reassured him for the fourth time since they'd stepped foot in the crazed mall. She took another sip from the frozen hot chocolate she'd picked up from Dairy Queen in the food court.

Bucky hated her just a little bit for looking so nonchalant. But then again she wasn't playing Secret

Santa for her not-quite-but-possibly-yes-indeed-sorta-boyfriend. Maybe. "What am I supposed to get him?"

"For the forty-seventh time, I would like to suggest—"

He cut her off for fear of running into yet another student from school. "That kind of thing costs more the budget allows."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Didn't realize you picked up prostitution as a side job." He rolled his eyes and stared down the map of the mall yet again silently begging it for help. "He likes those protein bars," Natasha suggested.

"Seriously? You expect me to get him just a protein bar?" She shrugged. "He deserves better with everything he's been going through," he said to himself.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, taking a step further into his personal space.

Bucky shook his head. "Remember how on the first day you said I had to ask Tony and Bruce about their history as brothers in sobriety?" She nodded. "Same thing for Steve—it's not my story to tell."

Natasha stared him down for a moment more before shrugging her shoulders and resuming her people-watching. "Maybe you should do a reciprocal thing. What would you like to get?" Bucky let a smile slip but kept quiet. She jabbed a nail into his ribs. "What?"

"It's an inside joke." He felt her staring him down so he sighed, knowing she wouldn't let up until he gave her an answer. "Sexyspoonrest."

"I'm sorry, did you just say—"

"Sexy. Spoon. Rest."

She took another sip of her drink while she pondered this. "Are we referring to shape or—"

"He said it was going to be a surprise."

"Huh."

"Why, you going to steal it as an idea for your special friend?" Natasha pulled a face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just don't know how much longer that's going to last."

Bucky looked down at her in confusion before jerking his head toward the nearby department store and leading her into the men's section. "Are you not having a good time with things?"

"No, it's not that," she said as she ran her fingers down the length of a light blue dress shirt sleeve. "It's better than I thought it would be, actually."

"So what's the problem?" Bucky asked as he dug through a pile of sweaters.

"Are you shopping for Steve or for yourself?"

Bucky shot her a dirty look. "Answer my question."

Natasha rolled her lips into a tight line as she considered her words. "I don't know. It's just starting

to be different."

His laughter rang out in their corner of the department store. "They're called feelings, Fembot." She spat a Russian curse at him that he'd heard too many times to count. "Nat," he said as he reached out to take her by the arm, "you're allowed to feel things."

She jerked away from his touch. "I know that, jackass. It's just easier when I don't."

"Hey," he said as he maneuvered his body to effectively corner between shelves of jeans and henleys; she tried to avoid the entrapment but gave up and instead studied her boots. "Just because you care about someone doesn't mean something awful is going to happen to them. I mean, nothing bad's happened to me."

"What makes you think I actually care about you?"

Bucky knew it was a joke even though her voice lacked its usual heat of sarcastic venom. He sighed. "You don't want to sleep with the guy any more, fine. But don't throw something away because you're scared of it."

She glared at him as her arms came up to cross under her chest. "Three dates and you think you're an expert on relationships?"

He crossed his arms and glared right back. "When was the last time you went on three dates with the same person? Not hook-ups, not booty calls—actual dates." Her silence confirmed his guess of college.

He rolled his lips in a motion to try and bring the words he wished he could say forth, but they remained lodged in his throat. His sisters, as loud and nosey and annoying as they could be, never needed to hear praise from him to know they were worthy of good things. It didn't mean he never offered it from time to time, but his compliments were just confirmation of facts.

Nat on the other hand... Nat was raised by a father who'd sent her away and a coach who'd spent hours nitpicking every tiny mistake. She had plenty of confidence in her abilities, just not herself at times, and Bucky hated that for her.

Sighing, he reached out and wrapped his hand around her wrist before pulling her out of the store. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Candy shop. Let's see how much two dollars' worth of Runt's is."

"I can't do this," Clint declared, dumping a gift bag on Darcy's desk. It looked mangled, like he'd tried crumpling it up. He also immediately stepped back away from it. "I'm spending all my spare time in the baby section, going *blind* from pink bibs—"

"Jessica will kill you if she pops out a boy," Darcy said as she picked tissue paper out of the bag.

"—and now this?" He waved a hand at the bag. "This is punishment, isn't it? I'm Old Hottie now, this is—"

He didn't get to finish because Darcy burst out laughing.

In the bottom of the gift bag was a plastic bottle dressed in what Darcy could only assume was a hand-crocheted bottle-sweater. She'd seen them before—her mother took perverse joy in dragging her to craft shows, after all; worse, sometimes Jane joined in—but never in such a horrifying blend

of purples.

And definitely never on a bottle of self-warming personal lubricant.

Clint scowled at her, but Darcy could not stop laughing. She nearly fell off her chair, and when Clint tried to snatch the bottle away, she scrambled out of range. "This is the *greatest*!" she declared. She tried holding it over her head, but Clint managed to grab it. "Holy shit, she is my new *hero*."

"Who?" Clint demanded. He actually sounded embarrassed; Darcy remembered that gift delivery'd taken place during his fifth grade team meeting, and that turned the whole thing funnier. "Because after the shell-shaped soaps and the tiny bottles of hand sanitizers, I thought it was Howard, but now—"

"Spoilers, sweetie," Darcy replied, but then she lost to another round of the giggles. Clint stuffed his sweated lube back into his gift bag and left the office in a rush; the next time Darcy was able to breathe, she discovered Carol, Jessica Drew, and Ororo all checking their mail.

"You okay?" Ororo asked.

"I am *fantastic*," Darcy announced, and decided she'd bring cookies for old Mrs. Howard in the morning.

Steve watched his mother, bundled up in a blue pea coat and black scarf, battle the cold December wind to cross the parking lot to join him. "You don't have to be here," he said as he held open the door to the inside of the hospital.

Sarah gave a full body shudder in an attempt to warm up. "You're still my kid, so you don't get to tell me what I don't have to do."

They silently wove their way through the corridors until they found themselves in the waiting area for diagnostic procedures. Steve took a clipboard from the nurse behind the desk, and he and his mom sat down in the row of uncomfortable, plastic chairs. "If I had a dollar for every one of these I've had to fill out, I could be half as rich as Tony by now." Sarah didn't react at his attempt at humor, so he gently elbowed her. "That was a joke."

The corner of her mouth twitched, but she didn't smile, and the foot that was crossed over her leg never stopped bouncing. "I shouldn't have come," she said quietly. "I'm supposed to be here to support you, not the other way around."

Steve set the clipboard in his lap so he could hold her hand. "It's going to be okay," he reassured as he swept his thumb over her knuckles. He could draw his mother's hands perfectly from memory. They'd brushed hair out of his face when he was sick, cleaned his wounds when he'd gotten into scrapes on the playground, played him music on her battered piano, sewed patches into his clothes, and cared for him in an endless number of ways.

Sarah turned her attention from the wall opposite to look over at him. "I wish I had your faith, and I'm sorry that I don't," she told him with a weak smile before she ducked her head to rest it on his shoulder.

He rested his cheek on top of her head as he continued to fill out his forms. "I was terrified when they called me," he admitted softly.

"Try having a kid someday, then you'll know what fear really is."

He chuckled. "That's not going to happen for a while, sorry. I know you've already planned out what all you're going to do with grandkids, but they're not coming from me any time soon."

"That's fine. I don't think I'm emotionally ready to be called 'grandma' yet, anyway."

He moved on to another set of forms and began to fill in his medical history on auto-pilot. "Where do you want to get dinner after this?"

Steve felt her mouth curl up slightly against his shoulder. "Think your boyfriend would cook me food, too?"

"If I asked? Yeah, probably."

"Seriously?" she asked as she pulled her head up off of his shoulder.

He shrugged while thinking about the texts Bucky'd sent him the day he was out for the first round of tests, the texts sent on his drive to the hospital, and the kiss they'd snuck at school this afternoon while the second grade teacher told him for the thousandth time that everything was going to be fine. "Yeah," he breathed.

Sarah's eyebrows went up. "I wasn't questioning the fact that he'd make me dinner; I was more marveled at the fact that for the first time in a long time I used the word 'boyfriend' and you didn't balk."

"Nice use of a baseball term."

"Steven."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know, Mom. We haven't had that talk."

"But there will eventually be a talk, right?"

It would've been impossible to miss the warning tone in her voice. "Yes, Mom."

"Just as long as you remember what I've told you."

Steve wouldn't be able to forget that conversation she'd had with him at the age of seventeen (and the several more along the same theme over the years) if he tried. She hadn't cared a bit about his sexuality when he reluctantly answered her question of "Are you gay?" on a drive to the grocery store one afternoon. Sarah had desperately yearned that he be careful with his heart. She'd commended him for being so caring and good, but she warned him that his gender wasn't the best at communicating, and that could be detrimental to a relationship.

Did that mean he was always the best communicator? No, but he had his mother's voice lurking in the back of his head, urging him to think with parts of his body other than his reproductive system.

These were the fun terminologies spoken in conversations you had as a teenager (and college student, as well as adult) when your mother was a nurse.

Steve finished up his forms and returned them to the nurse at the desk. He fought the urge to check his phone, especially after all the jokes his mother'd cracked at him for it over Thanksgiving a few weeks ago. Bucky knew he was going in for round two of tests after school, but he was the only one. Steve knew if things didn't come back clear he'd have to tell the others, and that was something he wasn't looking forward to. He didn't miss the looks of pity and fear people gave him, like the look his mother was trying to hide right now.

"It's going to be fine," he reassured her.

She nodded but didn't respond. They sat in silence for another ten minutes until she sighed. "Am I going to have to go back there and draw your blood myself?"

"You going to shove everyone out of the way and demand I get my PET scan immediately while you're back there?"

"I can."

He reached over and took her hand. "You really need to stop blaming Dad when I lose my temper because I'm scared; pretty obvious that's not where I got it from."

"Sorry," she apologized again. "How about that sushi place for dinner?"

He opened his mouth to reply when a nurse came through the door and called his name. "Sounds great," he said as he kissed his mother's cheek and stood. "See you in a bit."

"You sure you don't want me to come back with you?"

"Mom, I'm not thirteen anymore."

She bit down on whatever response she was going to say and simply nodded.

Steve followed the nurse, who looked like she was barely out of school, back to the room. "How are you?"

The sky is not falling, the sky is not falling, the sky is not falling, he repeated over and over in his head as he took a steady breath before smiling. "I feel fine."

"Tell me who my 'Santa' is, Darcy," Natasha demanded, and slammed a tiny jar on Darcy's desk.

Darcy paused in the middle of winding her Tom Baker scarf around her neck. "Hey, is that Nutella?" she asked. She picked up the jar, and then— "Okay, ew, nope!"

The offending container of *edible body paint* rolled along the carpet, impacted the wall, and came to rest just under the teacher's mailboxes.

"Tell me," Natasha repeated.

Darcy tore through her mental list of pairings, and then blinked in surprise. Natasha's glare intensified. "Look," she said, holding up her hands. "There must've been a mix-up, because there's no way that's from your match. Trust me."

Natasha's jaw flexed in raw anger.

"Trust me," Darcy repeated, and Natasha stormed out of the office.

Literally a minute and a half later, Pepper pushed through the door. "Have you seen Tony?" she demanded before Darcy could ask about the jar of body paint. Which, by the way, she was *so* leaving for the janitors.

"Definitely no," she answered. "Why?"

"Because he switched out my gift for Natasha this morning while I— What?" Pepper asked, and

then followed Darcy's finger toward the floor. She then frowned, walked over to the mailboxes, and— "I am going to kill him."

"You won't be able to collect the life insurance if you do!" Darcy called after her as she stalked away, body paint in hand.

"Wanda has boys, right?" Steve asked, leaning over Darcy's chair. He smelled dark and spicy. Darcy craned her neck to sniff him better just as he twisted to look her in the eye. She flared red, and Steve frowned. "Darcy, this is serious."

"Only you think Secret Santa's this serious," she muttered, and jerked her attention back to the Target website. Steve always tried to assemble thoughtful gifts for his Secret Santa victim, and this year was no exception. They were browsing different bath products, for god's sake! "I think she'd appreciate a way to get the two of them out of the house more than she'd like bubble bath," she said after making a mental note to check out the in-store prices on those facial masks.

Steve sighed. "You're probably right."

"You usually don't pull me aboard the Thoughtful Express," Darcy said as she closed out of Firefox. Steve straightened up a little, clearing his throat; she grinned. "Steve Rogers, are you here to *bribe* me?"

"I—" Steve commented. He rubbed the back of his neck. Darcy barely bit down on her hoot of glee. "I actually wanted to thank you, not bribe you."

"*Thank* me? Uhm, the only person who's ever thanked me for their Secret Santa match-up was Sitwell, and that's because he's got a line on Coulson's bathtub hot sauce or whatever."

"Damn straight!" Sitwell yelled from his office. He'd kept the door cracked for the last few days, waiting to see if Fury exploded over all his tiny pirate-themed gifts. Day three, no violence. She suspected he was disappointed at that.

"Well," Steve continued, "I don't know if this year tops when Tony had me my first year—"

"Didn't he buy you different art prints every day?" she asked.

"—but my gifts are nice. And definitely not as terrifying as usual." Darcy cringed; Steve'd suffered two years in a row at the hands of Mrs. Howard. "I figured I should thank you."

Darcy raised her hands. "I am beholden to the random number generator, nothing more."

He smiled. "Somehow, I seriously doubt that."

"Those cookies smell *so* good," Alva said, her nose resting on the edge of the counter.

Jane sent her a sharp look, and when she didn't immediately back away, slid the tray of homemade Christmas cookies a few inches further out of her daughter's reach. "Those cookies are for your brothers' classes, not for you and definitely not for breakfast."

"But there will be plenty to feast upon when you arrive home!" Alva's screech of delight almost drowned out the echoing boom of Thor's voice as he hoisted her off her feet and over his shoulder. She kicked lightly, but for naught. "Thievery ensures that Santa will not come!"

"Santa *has* to come!" Alva complained.

Thor winked at Jane, who flashed him a grin before shaking her head. "Is that so?" he asked, carrying the girl back toward her bedroom. Despite Jane helping her pick an acceptable outfit, Alva still wore her nightgown and slippers.

"I need new ponies!"

"*Need?*"

Alva huffed. "Want," she amended. Thor swung her down toward the floor and let her feet dangle a few inches above the carpet until she squirmed out of his grip. "Why don't you ever come to my class?" she demanded.

Thor placed his hands on his hips. "I am sensing today is not a day for gratitude."

Alva screwed up her face at him. "You always go to Henry and George's classes and bring treats. You never go to mine."

"Yes, but next year, I hope I will be able to come to all three of your classrooms."

"Why next year?" Alva pressed. "Why not this year?"

Thor sighed and shook his head. His youngest child had, from birth, been the most imaginative and curious—but sometimes, her curiosity turned to something far less playful than her questions about the seasons or the sun. He crouched down to her level. "Because I cannot constantly be at the school and not at work," he told her, pushing the loose hair out of her face, "and your classes hold different activities on different days. Your mother comes to your class when she can, and I go to your brothers' classes. When your brothers were your age, your mother helped them, too." Alva frowned at him. "You will get your turn."

"I want my turn *now*," Alva insisted. "I want you to come, and bring treats like Henry and George get."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "Alva."

"What?"

"Is this about the cookies?" Alva squirmed guiltily, and Thor grinned at her. "I lose favor quickly when cookies are involved."

"They have sparkly sprinkles, Daddy! Like Twilight Sparkle!"

"Get dressed," Thor instructed, laughing at her.

Corralling all three children into the car for school was difficult during the best of times but promised disaster on the day of the school holiday parties and assembly. Jane laughed on Thor's third trip back into the kitchen, this time for Henry's mittens, and he only quieted her by pinning her to the counter and kissing her. "Next time, you are the holiday party parent for all three," he threatened.

"Never," she replied, and grazed teeth against his jaw before letting him escape.

The school was overrun with children too excited for coherent words, and Thor was unsurprised to see all three of his joining the ranks. Alva clung to his leg as he tried to slip into the office—hidden

among the trays of treats was a plate of cookies specifically for Darcy (and not to be shared with Assistant Principal Sitwell, according to Jane)—and flashed doe eyes at him. "Alva," he warned, and her lip wobbled. A few of the teachers were attempting to attract their respective students into their classrooms, all with limited success. Thor could see the pre-kindergarten teacher waving the rest of her small students down the hallway.

He sighed and slipped a hand under the cling wrap on the first tray. "Do not tell your mother," he warned, and sent her to class with a bell-shaped cookie with silver sprinkles.

After the delivery to Darcy and several rounds of banter—"Carol just threatened my life if I don't reveal her secret Santa!" she announced—Thor gathered up his collection of cookies and headed down toward the kindergarten rooms. For all his boisterous bravery, George often clung to Thor when he arrived for a classroom activity—reading books with the children, dropping off a forgotten project, picking him up after an unfortunate disagreement with breakfast. Thor wanted him to be as brave and independent as his siblings, which was why he planned to only stay long enough to deliver the treats. After all, Mr. Barnes's second grade classroom would have fewer parents present to begin with, and—

"Dad!" George announced the second Thor crossed the threshold, and nearly knocked the tray of cookies out of his grip. The classroom boasted several craft stations, as far as Thor could tell, each with a different project that was both educational and fun: at one table, each child counted out precisely 20 cotton balls to glue onto Santa's beard; at another, the children sounded out the syllables of the colors that would fill in a holiday coloring project.

Thor attempted to greet Dr. Banner, who was crouched near a table of children making snowflakes using cut-out shapes and glue sticks, but George hugged him tighter. "I told everybody that your cookies were the best *and* that you'd help make the longest paper chain."

Thor set the cookies on the snack table and tipped his head down toward his son. "Paper chain?"

"For counting off the days until we come back to school! We have to get help writing one thing we did every day, like we write on the board in class." He wrapped his small fingers around Thor's wrist and dragged him toward the table with the chain supplies. "Then we share when we come back."

"If it's the days until break is over, aren't all the chains going to be the same length?" Thor asked.

George stopped and stared up at him. "You'll make the best one, then."

"This isn't a contest, Goran."

"Just help," George insisted, pulling out a chair for his father. Thor cast his eyes across the classroom at Dr. Banner, but the teacher nodded. He knew from e-mails that George'd struggled with the other kindergarteners over the last few weeks of school. He was a smart boy, but not the most adept at some of the new skills the children were learning—or at coordination.

George pushed a stack of paper strips across the table. "Here," he instructed.

Thor smiled. "I am not sure this is what father had in mind when I took over the construction business," he informed his son and the other children at the table. George grinned.

Once the paper chain was complete—"The best in the whole class!" George bragged until Thor quieted him with a single glance—Thor gathered up the second tray of cookies and headed toward Mr. Barnes's second grade classroom. All through the hallway, he could hear students laughing and

holiday music playing. He was glad to know his children weren't the only ones who lost some amount of control during the holiday.

Unlike Dr. Banner's educational craft stations, however, Mr. Barnes's classroom still managed some level of normalcy. A few students were finishing what appeared to be math worksheets when Thor slipped in through the door, and others were working on coloring pages or other holiday activities. One girl, quite conscientiously, was picking up the debris from making a paper snowflake.

"There's my dad!" Henry announced, abandoning his efforts on his math sheet to point. "He's here, now, math is over!"

Thor frowned, and across the room, Mr. Barnes smiled. "Henry volunteered you to read the book they selected to kick off the party," he reported.

"Did he?"

"Because you read the books better than anyone else," Henry announced.

"Henry—"

"No, I mean you do the *voices*." The boy tipped back on his chair until a warning look from both Thor and Mr. Barnes settled him again. "Mister Barnes tries, but he never does them right."

The teacher stifled a chuckle. "Thanks, Henry," he said, and left the girls and their paper snowflake mess to come over and offer Thor a hand, which Thor readily shook. "I'm sorry," Barnes apologized, as though he was the one with control over Henry's behavior. "They're all a little wound up. Parties, assemblies, and the fact that there'll be candy waiting for them at library time?" He shook his head. "I'm going to need a professional cleaning crew in here by the time the day's over."

"I can volunteer several very small laborers."

Barnes laughed. "There's a reason why Henry's not on clean-up duty anymore," he confided. "Come on, let me show you the book they picked. It's pretty cute, about a kid trying to capture Santa . . ."

Thor started to follow Barnes to his desk when he heard his son's voice announce, "No way!" He hardly had to glance over his shoulder to discover that Henry was bickering over which homemade treats would be the best-tasting. According to him, Jane's would win without contest.

Thor sighed. "Suddenly, I understand why Mother ended every one of my boastful tirades with, 'Just wait until you have children,'" he murmured to himself.

Barnes glanced up from his desk. "Huh?"

"Nothing," Thor replied, forcing a small smile. "Now, about that book."

"You know, if you keep staring that much at him, people are really going to start to believe those threesome rumors about us."

Tony rolled his eyes while keeping his gaze locked on Bruce. "Please."

Pepper squinted at her husband. "Were you the one who actually started those rumors?"

"No, but I should have. They're hilarious."

Pepper sighed and shook her head as she looked across the living room to where Bruce was giving May Parker her final gift as her Secret Santa. "What do you think is going to happen? That's he's just going to walk over to some woman here and start screwing her in front of Fury and everyone just to let you know who his special friend is?"

"It would save him from the line of questions he's about to get from me."

"How do you even know she's on staff?"

Tony couldn't help but shoot her his *Don't insult my genius intelligence* look. He might pay for that later—and depending on the form of punishment, it might be worth it. "Who else is Bruce friends with? No one. He won't risk this type of thing with someone from our meetings. It has to be someone on staff."

Pepper ran her nails over his shoulders before settling her hand on his back. "Leave him be. It's the happiest he's looked in a while."

"You know I'm physically incapable of doing that, right?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Just go easy on him?"

"I make no promises," he said as he leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Did you give Carol her concert ticket?"

"Yep, she loved it."

"Did you tell her the other half of that present?"

His grin was the only answer he gave. Of course he hadn't, why ruin that special detail? Pepper chuckled before kissing him quickly and walking away to give Natasha her final Secret Santa gift.

Tony looked out at the room. He was never one to handle maudlin shit all that well, hence one of the reasons for his abusive drinking, but he could take a moment to appreciate his current surroundings. At the moment, nearly the entire staff of the school was crammed into his home to deliver their final gifts and to celebrate the start of winter break.

It still felt odd to feel such a warm feeling in his belly about the presence of these people around him. Not that he would ever admit to such a thing out loud, but it was true. Never could he have imagined that this was how his life would turn out, but most days—not when the snotty mongrels wreaked havoc on his computers—he was pretty happy about it.

Receiving twenty dollars worth of power strips from the crazy, smelly, lunch lady as a final gift? Not so much. But the rest of it—the party, the food, and the company—was good.

Phil strode up to Tony, a can of coke in his hand. "Thanks for hosting."

"No problem. What did you end up with?"

"Peter Parker gave me twenty dollars worth of ties from Goodwill."

Tony barked a laugh. "That has May written all over it."

A bewildered Clint joined the group, handed his car keys to his husband, and downed one of the

two drinks in his hand like it was a shot. "Howard was my Santa," he muttered before throwing back the other drink. "She bought us lube, Phil. *Lube*. She thought about us having sex."

"To be fair, it's hard to not to think about you two having sex when you talk about how much of it you have all the time," Tony offered.

Clint leveled a glare at him. "Kettle, this is the pot—you're black."

"What did she get you for the final present?" Phil asked. Clint responded by holding out a small gift bag for the librarian's inspection; Phil's head jerked back in shock and horror. He promptly handed the car keys he'd just acquired off to Tony and headed for the makeshift bar for a stronger drink.

"You know," Tony said conspiratorially, "Phil got lots of ties for his final gift."

Clint groaned. "I'm going to need Viagra for a month to get over this, which sucks because it's winter break. I should be having all-day sex-fests, but now I'm going to have that seven-hundred-year-old woman stuck in my head, and nope. Can't, just can't."

"You're not spending the night here," Tony informed him. "Drink all you want, but have Bruce take you two home. Unlike you, I'm all for non-stop sex-fests and I don't have any issues with a getting a start on that this evening." Clint wandered away with another groan.

Tony's eyes swept the room once more until they fell on the circle of conversationalists standing by the sofa. The circle included Wanda, Carol, Bruce, and both Jessicas. He waited until he caught Bruce's eyes before raising his eyebrows and subtly pointing at the single women in the conversation. The kindergarten teacher rolled his eyes and went back to focusing on Carol describing the concert ticket Tony'd gotten her.

He stared them down a moment more before shrugging and walking off. Odds were good they weren't good candidates anyway: Wanda had kids, Jessica Drew was a bit insane, and Carol was too intimidating. Tony meandered over to the kitchen island to swipe another homemade cookie that Darcy'd managed to smuggle in from Jane. The Odinson children were nightmares, but holy shit, their mom baked sprinkled manna from heaven.

Tony looked around for the quirky office manager and found her standing near the entryway between the formal dining room and the living room. He shook his head as he watched her unsuccessfully manipulate people into standing under the mistletoe. He ambled up to her and muttered "amateur" in her ear before taking another bite of the cookie.

Darcy pouted at him. "Why is no one letting me smash their faces together?"

"Because you have to be subtle about it. Watch and learn."

"When in your life have you ever been subtle?"

He smirked but didn't say anything else on the matter. "Hey, how much did you spend on gift cards for the regular subs?"

"Don't worry about it," Darcy replied as she literally waved him off.

Tony pulled a twenty out of his pocket and offered it to her. She stared him down for a second before taking his offering and sticking it down her bra. She then pulled a five out of her own pocket and held it out to him. "What's this?"

"Change."

"You only bought three ten-dollar coffee gift cards to your hipster coffee place?"

"No," she corrected, "I bought four, but I'm not letting you help pay for one."

Tony groaned. "Please tell me you do not have a thing for Wilson."

Darcy shrugged. "He's cute."

"Your children will be terrifying."

"I know, right?" She looked around the room. "So, how are we going to do this?"

Tony scoped the room once more until he found a target. "This way." He made his way towards the front hallway where Natasha, Steve, and Bucky were huddled in conversation. Darcy followed on his heels. "What's up, kids? Did we all get good presents?"

Natasha nodded. "Your wife is excellent at giving gifts."

He grinned. "She's really good at giving other things, too." The group simultaneously rolled their eyes. "What about you guys?" he asked Steve and Bucky.

"Fury gave me a nice bottle of booze," Bucky said. "I kind of wonder if there's something to all the pirate stuff Sitwell gave him this week—other than the eye patch of course—and if he smuggled it in from somewhere." He paused to shrug. "I mean, I'll still drink it and all."

"And what about you?" Tony asked Steve.

The art teacher gave a small grin. "Something nice."

"Yeah, but not nicer than those pics I gave you that year, right?"

Darcy shook her head. "I can't believe you couldn't've waited 'till I was here before you gave the wholesome Mister Rogers nude photographs."

"Hey," he said pointing a finger at her, "they were classy. And if I'd known then what I know now, I would've made sure they were of the male variety." He pulled his phone out of his back pocket. "By the way, I think I found a good replacement engine for that bike you're storing in your garage. Nothing fancy," he promised, raising his hands in a defensive posture as Steve gave him a sharp look, "just something that will get the job done, exactly like you asked. Wanna see?" he asked as he wiggled his phone in the air.

Steve shrugged and came over to stand next to Tony. The technology teacher flicked through pictures and information while throwing a quick wink at Darcy as the other two teachers moved towards each other to whisper a conversation between themselves.

"Oh, by the way," Tony announced before waving a finger back and forth between Natasha and Bucky, "you two have to kiss now."

The pair looked up at the mistletoe now hanging above them before they both swore. Darcy and Tony laughed while Bucky and Natasha complained about siblings kissing each other.

The Starks (Except Never Call Her Mrs. Stark)

Chapter Notes

This is another instance where we're taking a break from the main storyline(s) to provide some back story, specifically Tony and Pepper's. Special thanks to my friend for helping me a bit with the art therapy stuff.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Tony said, watching as the tsunami of kids poured off the big yellow school bus on the first day of school.

"You'll be fine," Bruce replied, but for the first time in the last three months, he didn't quite sound convinced.

If the little angel on Tony's shoulder with the glasses, curly hair, and rumpled button-down shirt, had popped up ten years earlier and announced that Tony would one day be an elementary school technology teacher, Tony would've laughed himself sick. From his MIT graduation day until shockingly recently, his life'd consisted of every stupid teenage daydream he'd ever cooked up as a kid: fast cars, beautiful women, fame, fortune, and exotic adventures. He'd done lime-and-tequila body shots off supermodels in Monte Carlo, owned (and crashed) cars worth more than most people's first houses, and all while devoting his big, terrifying brain to everything he loved in the world.

You know, innovation. And explosions. Mostly the former, of course, but the latter generally followed pretty closely.

Now, he stood on the concrete sidewalk outside the front doors of an elementary school, staring down a gaggle of ankle-biters and—

"Nope, no running," Barton said as he stepped around a little redheaded kid who was trying to zip after her friend. The kid skidded to a stop and stared up at the guy, wide-eyed and terrified-looking. Not that Tony blamed him; he didn't know much about Barton yet, but you couldn't quite miss the arms.

Barton flashed Freckles a smile and watched as she studiously *walked* off the way she was supposed to. "All the Harrison kids have bright red hair," he warned, adjusting his bag over his shoulder. "You can see 'em from space, but they're runners."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Shouldn't you be policing the hallways or rearranging desks?" he asked.

"And miss Mister Big Stuff's first day?" Barton retorted. His grin consisted entirely of teeth, and Tony rolled eyes at him. "I should be selling your picture to *Star Inquirer* right now."

"I swear, you're on one magazine cover *once*, and suddenly—"

"Weren't you on *Time* three different times before you were thirty?" the fifth-grade teacher challenged.

Tony raised his hand. "One magazine cover three times, whatever. The point is, I should be able to live it down in my new, improved, giving-back-to-society life instead of— I'm going to assume that

tree-climbing is an illegal move before school and go take care of that," Tony decided, half because Barton couldn't stop grinning and half because, yes, there were three kids up a *tree* ten minutes before the first day of school.

He hated his life, sometimes.

Actually, no, he hated Bruce Banner's appearance in his life, all wrinkled and adorable at their weekly meetings, wearing a sheepish smile for the first six months and then starting to open up like one of those night-blooming flowers you hear about. Tony'd been firmly established in their group before Bruce showed up, armed with his proverbial pocket full of anniversary chips and intimate knowledge of which snack group made the worst coffee, but Bruce'd sort of surprised him.

With the rueful smiles, and then, with the fact that he understood. Everything Tony'd struggled to explain to the group—his insanely weird childhood, his less-than-stellar relationship with his father, the women and the cars and the waking up in a seedy motel with a nearly-infected tattoo etched across his chest—Bruce understood. They'd become acquaintances, and then, finally, friends.

Bruce was the reason that Tony finally stuck up both middle fingers at Obadiah and the shady, sneaky bullshit happening behind his back at Stark Industries. Of course, Bruce hadn't quite approved of Tony's methods, necessarily—breaking into secured databases to read all about secret projects smacked of the same thing Tony'd complained about, Bruce said—but he'd been encouraging.

Supportive.

And, most importantly, willing to come over and eat ice cream barefoot in the middle of winter while Tony figured out the next phase of his life.

"I don't think you're supposed to be climbing that tree," Tony said when he finally trekked out to the schoolyard, where the three boys were definitely all perched in the branches. The oldest was probably ten, but the other ones were smaller and probably still pretty breakable.

They also all looked at each other. "Who're you?" the oldest one asked.

"That's your opening gambit?"

"We're not supposed to talk to strangers," one of the younger ones commented. His blond hair was cut in a faux hawk. Tony hated human parents.

He also sighed. "My name's T— Mister Stark."

"We don't know a Mister Stark," the third one replied.

"Of course you don't know me. It's my first day. Now, c'mon, be a friend and get out of the tree."

"What do you teach?" the oldest asked.

"I'm the new technology teacher."

"Our technology teacher is named Mister Pierson," Faux Hawk retorted snottily, "not Mister Stark."

"Maybe you missed the part where I said 'new' technology teacher. As in, 'replacing the old one, who retired to Florida and left me with a closet full of Apple IIs.'" The kids all stared at him. He

waved off their attention. "Older-than-dirt computers. Trust me, if you were about ten years older, that would've been hilarious."

"My mom has a computer with Windows 95," the third one informed Tony, swinging his leg idly.

"Yeah, older than that."

"There aren't computers older than Kevin's mom's computer," the ringleader returned. Tony really was starting to dislike the tone of his voice. It was superior as hell, like he thought himself the resident expert on everything. "Kevin's mom's computer is, like, *ancient*."

"It's not even a laptop," Faux Hawk added.

"Yeah, well, that's nothing compared to the sh—crap I've got in the supply closet upstairs," Tony informed them all. If they caught his slip of the tongue, they at least kept their mouths shut about it. "Now, will you get out of the tree?"

The kids exchanged glances.

"Better yet: if I promise to set up one of the older-than-dirt computers and get some old games running on it for you to fool around on after school, *then* will you get out of the tree?"

Tony'd never seen three snotty-ass kids move so fast.

By the next morning, he'd rearranged the computer lab to set up three of the ancient Apples in a corner, a living display of the history of computing. And that's how he spent the first three days of fifth grade curriculum, too, breaking into the wonderfully mind-numbing world of Mavis Beacon to show off PowerPoints of the world's first supercomputers, of different microchips, and how the world'd shifted from computers the size of the school library to the tiny ones people just called "phones."

At the end of his first week, he'd glanced up from where he was putting a new end on a Cat-5 cable to see Bruce hovering in the computer lab's doorway. He grinned. "If this is the part where you tell me you told me so, I'm going to counter by saying you started this."

"You're the one who complained about being unemployed," Bruce reminded him.

"Only because you were sick of coming over for midnight Netflix marathons when you, like a lameass, had to get up and work in the mornings." Bruce cracked a smile at that, and Tony went back to the Cat-5 cable. He left out the part of the story where, after a year of unemployment and misery—not creating, not producing, not being anything but the weird reclusive guy who left his company and disappeared into the night—Bruce'd glanced across the kitchen and told him, *You'd be good in the technology position at my school*.

Tony'd retorted with an eye-roll and a promise he'd be good at pole dancing, too, but that was no reason to take it up. And yet, here he was, week one into the craziest adventure of his life.

"Everyone's going to Xavier's for happy hour," Bruce said as Tony finished twisting the end onto the cable. "Clint thinks that if he begs especially hard, you'll buy a round."

"You reminded him that I'm rich, right? I mean, I know he's a couple pay grades under us, so he's probably used to buying 36-packs of Keystone Light, but he must realize he doesn't have to beg."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "You're turning down the opportunity to see one of your new coworkers grovel?"

"I'm stating facts about my financial well-being, that's all." Bruce shook his head to hide his grin, and Tony hopped up off the floor. He grabbed his keys, switched off the lights, and then slung an arm around Bruce's shoulders. "I'll buy you a ginger ale, no groveling required."

"To what do I owe the honor?"

"Call it a down payment on the next year-plus of fun," Tony replied, and locked his computer lab behind them while Bruce laughed.

Pepper Potts found herself in France. Even she thought that sentence sounded cliché, but it was true.

Growing up the youngest of four children and being the only daughter was an interesting childhood. Her younger years consisted of wrestling with her brothers, being doted on by her father, and helping her mother with chores around the farm as soon as she was old enough to do work.

Her father raised pigs in the countryside of Virginia. He loved his land so much he named his daughter after it. Her nickname came from a combination of her red hair and fiery temper; the latter was something that showed up often enough in her childhood when she grew tired of her brothers taking advantage of her gullibility.

She never realized how poor her family was until she started school. It was the one thing she hated about growing up, and Pepper figured out at a young age that if she wanted to go beyond high school, she was going to have to figure out a way to pay for it herself. Especially since there was no way her father—who loved her dearly but had trouble seeing beyond the fence marking the farm's boundary—would agree to help pay for an art history degree.

Pepper fell in love with paintings on an eighth grade trip to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The feeling of standing in front of the actual paint and brush strokes of pieces she'd seen in books was incredible and something she never forgot. It helped fuel her motivation to finish first in her class and earn a full-ride scholarship.

It was hard leaving the farm and the supportive knot of relatives who all lived in the area, but she was ready to take the strength her mother instilled in her (because although her father was the farmer, her mother ran the house) and move on to the next step in her life.

She didn't break out of her shell until her junior year of college, when she spent a year in Paris. While there, she learned a number of invaluable skills: fluency in French, how to pick a good red wine, the trick to dealing with egotistical people, and how to dress well for not a lot of money. Her confidence grew, and she went from being a wallflower to feeling comfortable with taking charge of things. She fell deeper in love with art; her boss at her internship at a gallery told her she could run her own museum one day, and that was the plan.

At least, it was until she returned home.

Back at college, Pepper volunteered during her senior year at an elementary school, and there she was introduced to the concept of art therapy. She scrapped her graduate school plans of pursuing an MBA to instead earn a degree in the therapeutic field. She would still be able to help people discover a love for art, but she would also be improving their health while doing it.

The two years after undergrad were spent studying psychology and completing practicum hours by observing people of various ages and degrees of mental health. She confessed to her mother one

late night on the phone that she was pretty sure she'd have to stick to young kids because working with adults depressed her.

Once her graduate work was completed, she began the rite of passage known to adults as the initial job hunt. This was really the only time that she'd wished she'd stuck with her original plan; school counselor salaries weren't quite what her closet hoped they'd be. Because even though in the comfort of her own apartment she loved to wear cut-off denim shorts and a ratty tee, for work she enjoyed putting on tailored skirts and dresses with killer shoes. She'd survive wearing knock-offs and tell the little poor farmer's daughter who lived in her head and still reeled from being made fun at school for not having a nice nor expansive closet that things would be fine.

Her third interview was with a one-eyed principal. Pepper didn't tell her mother that she'd delayed on accepting a position at a nearby middle school because she was waiting to see what would happen at that elementary school. Thankfully, things worked in her favor.

Pepper swore the man appeared in her office out of thin air. One second she was reaching into her bottom drawer to grab her purse in preparation of heading home, and then, when she sat back up, he was draped across one of the chairs across the desk from her. She jerked in surprise; he never lifted his face from his phone.

"You confuse me," Tony said, still avoiding eye contact.

She cocked her head in curiosity. "I'm the confusing one?"

"Yeah," he answered as he locked his phone and slid it onto her desk. "Pulling kids out of class, asking them to do what? Color in coloring books?"

She took a steadying breath. Thankfully, her oldest brother had similar words to her on several occasions, so Pepper knew where to take this argument. "Not necessarily. What I try to do is—"

"Does it work on adults?"

She shook her head in reaction to the conversational whiplash he'd just caused. "Ummm, yes."

"Fix me," he requested.

"Right now? I don't have a magic wand; that's not how this works."

He flapped his hand in the air. "But you can get a start, right? Figure out what's wrong with me? I'm told I'm a head case. Plenty people who'd like to crack this noggin' open. What do you say?"

Pepper bit her bottom lip as she snuck a glance at the clock on the wall. She wanted to be in her car driving home right now. Home to a hot bubble bath and a bottle of red. It was the end of her first week with students and school being in full swing and her brain needed a break.

It did not need to deal with Tony Stark and his ego. She'd been warned about him and his womanizing tendencies. Granted, rumor had it that he behaved himself (as well as someone with his reputation could) with the staff at the school, but still. She could remember going to the grocery store with her mom ten years ago and seeing his face on the tabloid magazines when he was reportedly dating a string of women.

"C'mon," he goaded. "Do me."

"Excuse me?"

"Do your shrink thing. Tell me how I've screwed up my life. Or I could just start talking, but I think you like the pictures more than the words. Should I draw a picture? How about the nanny I had when I was still fourteen. I mean—fourteen, right? That alone probably knocked a screw or two loose."

Pepper waved him off in order to silence him. "Okay, we can do something. It could take a while. You sure you want to stay late on a Friday afternoon?"

He shrugged. "There's a meeting for the content teachers going on and then most of us are heading over to Xavier's for happy hour afterwards. We can kill time until then. C'mon, tell me what's wrong with me and I'll buy you dinner."

"That's not necessary."

"Not a fan of bar food? We could go somewhere else."

"That's okay."

His jaw dropped slightly. "Are you—did you just—did I just get rejected? Is that what this is?" Pepper opened her mouth to lie her way through some explanation, but he kept talking. "Because this hasn't happened in years, possibly over a decade." He quirked her head and stared her down as he tried to process what was happening. "Is this what it feels like to be Bruce?" he asked himself quietly. "Am I not your type?" he questioned. "You prefer blondes? I can hook you up with the new art teacher; I'm told he's pretty dreamy. Or are guys not your thing? Because I know the P.E. teacher, too. I don't know if she's into that, and she'd probably kill me on sight for asking but—"

"Mister Stark," Pepper interrupted.

"Call me Tony."

"Tony, if you aren't going to take this seriously, I have better things—"

"Nope. Serious. Serious as a train wreck. Let's do this."

She sighed but nonetheless grabbed a sheet of plain white paper from a tray on her desk. She slid the sheet and a pencil across to him. "Draw a house," she instructed.

"Whose house?"

"Any house you want. Just draw it. You can use the eraser to fix any mistakes you want, just draw."

She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and listened to the scratch of his pencil on the paper. When she opened her eyes to check his progress a moment later, she saw that half of his page was covered in numbered sentences. "What are you doing?" she asked as she leaned forward.

"Writing out the steps on how to draw a house. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

"If you're a male engineer? Yes, that's actually common," she answered as she grabbed a clean sheet of paper. "But I want you to draw a picture, not tell me how someone else should draw something."

He sighed but obediently began sketching. When Pepper tried to peek at his picture, he set his left arm on the desk to block her view like one of their students might do to prevent their neighbor from cheating off of them during a spelling test. "You know I'm going to have to look at it eventually,

don't you?" she asked.

"You can wait until I'm finished," he answered as he continued his scrawling. He continued his drawing for a couple more minutes until he sat back in his seat. "Well?"

Pepper slid the picture to face her with a manicured fingernail and studied it a moment before speaking. She'd expected the drawing to represent his own home, a common result in the first phase of the house-tree-person test, but instead Tony had drawn a shack. "Normally this is where I'd start asking a series of questions about the drawing, like who lives in the house?"

He waved her off. "Forget the questions, just tell me what you see."

"Okay," she drawled. She inspected his artistic offering once more before she began to speak. "There are only two windows drawn, both are small and cross-hatching over them. This usually means that you hesitate to be open with others. The size of the house is small, which points to not wanting anything to do with a family life. The lines you used to draw the walls, are thick—you enjoy having set boundaries with people. And all of this is based upon your childhood."

His eyes flickered back and forth between his picture and her face before he said, "Okay, the standoffishness can be pretty easy to suss out, but what makes you so sure this is because of my childhood? Maybe my early twenties were rough. Spoiler alert: they were."

"I can guess it's about your upbringing because of which part of the page you drew it on."

His gaze snapped down the picture and he stared at it like it was about to spew some secret code. "What are you talking about?"

"You drew the picture in the bottom left quadrant of the page," she answered. "That's the sector relating to far past."

"Huh," he answered.

"Do you want to move on to coloring the house or to the next thing I want you to draw?"

"Let's do both," he answered as he grabbed a new sheet of paper and pulled the basket of crayons on her desk over to him. "What am I drawing now? Another house?"

"A tree."

"Simple enough," he muttered as he began to root around for a certain color before getting to work. A minute later he slid the drawing over to her for inspection. "Well? It's a spruce—good sturdy wood. Conifer—doesn't lose leaves in the winter. And I colored it yellow, because why not."

She looked at it before shaking her head a bit. "It made look sturdy—nice, thick stump." She glared him down before he could articulate any tawdry comments about other parts of him that were nice and thick. Pepper had brothers, she knew how conversations like this went. "The stump, by the way, refers to your ego, which is large and in charge according to this, but I'm not sure how sturdy the tree actually is since you didn't draw anything resembling roots. And yellow represents energy, which is amusing considering the type of tree you drew."

"What's amusing about the type of tree?"

"It's phallic-shaped," she answered.

"You're saying I draw energy from my penis?"

"I'm not saying anything, I'm just looking at what you drew."

His eyes shifted back and forth between the two drawings, his face showing an increase in how uncomfortable he felt with the secrets he may have unknowingly shared. Rashly, he swiped his previous drawings from her desk, and grabbed a new sheet of paper and a pencil. "Start over," he said. "This time I'm going to do it with my left hand."

She felt herself begin to sweat as soon as they walked into the cathedral. Pepper wanted to punch Tony for demanding a date from her. She questioned her own sanity for accepting Tony's attempt at asking (more like demanding) her out when they entered the church filled to the brim with people who had more money than God.

Was it sacrilegious to think of that joke in a place of worship?

A place of worship that Tony hadn't mentioned. He'd only said the wedding was going to be "at some place" and the reception was going to be "at a hotel." He'd neglected to mention that said hotel was probably the swankiest one within a hundred miles. She drew her feet further back under the pew seat in hopes no one around her would notice the fact that her shoes were knock-offs.

"Tell me about the art," Tony not-so-much asked next to her.

"What?"

"The art," he said as he pointed at the murals surrounding them. "Tell me stuff about it." Her puzzlement must've been clearly evident on her face because Tony sighed and rolled his eyes a little. "I promised Bruce I wouldn't play games on my phone during the ceremony part of things—reception is still free game. I'm bored, so tell me about the art. Isn't that what your degree is in?"

"Did you stalk that information about me like you did my address?" The comment was out of her mouth before she could rein it in, but it made his brown eyes dance and the corners of his mouth twitch so she didn't apologize.

Swallowing her nerves at the money and fanciness around her, she began to study the paint on the walls and ceiling. She talked him through what style they were in, which artists they were modeled after, and some fun facts about religion portrayed by art. The whole time he nodded and asked thoughtful questions. She gave him an inquisitive look. "I didn't picture you to be someone interested in art."

He shrugged and rolled his lips before admitting, "My mother was involved with the art museum and sat on their board. She'd host functions there for charities when I was a kid."

Pepper didn't get a chance to pursue his childhood any further since processional music began to play. Besides, she was pretty sure he'd duck out of that conversation in no time flat. She spent the entirety of the ceremony with Tony's arm draped along the pew behind her. It was difficult to ignore the warmth coming off of him and the spicy smell of his aftershave. She'd expected him to at least try and grope her thigh once during the ceremony, and she surprisingly found herself a little disappointed that there wasn't an attempt.

What kind of magical powers of attraction did this man possess?

Apparently plenty, judging from the number of women who waltzed up to him during dinner. With each new rendition of "Hey, Tony, remember me?", Pepper found what little interest in her date she'd built up before arriving at the hotel starting to dissipate. She didn't want to think about how many women in the room he'd been with (a list that could easily include all the bridesmaids and the

bride herself), and Pepper especially didn't want to think about what those women thought of her.

"You need anything?" Tony asked once dinner was finished.

"Martini. Very dry with lots of olives. At least three."

"You got it," he answered as he rose from his seat to make his way to the bar.

While he was gone, she took in the grand scope of the room with the flowing fabrics draped from the ceiling, twinkling lights strung everywhere, and a small fortune of white flowers dispersed among the room. Pepper took a deep breath and tried not to think about how much money was surrounding her and how out of place she felt. She surreptitiously checked her phone to see texts from both Natasha and Phil. The librarian asked how things were going; the P.E. teacher wondered if she needed to fake an injury and demand that Pepper be the one to drive her to the hospital. Pepper ignored them both for the moment.

Tony returned a few minutes later with her drink and a coke for himself. She had most of her martini down her throat before he was fully seated back in his chair. His eyebrows shot up towards his hairline. "Everything okay? Should I have gotten two of those?"

"I'm fine," she answered with a forced smile.

A waiter came by to deliver flutes filled with champagne to the guests. Pepper accepted hers as Tony waved the man off. "I don't like being handed things."

Pepper set her flute on the table and grabbed the drink offered to Tony. "Luckily, I love being handed things. Thank you."

She set the glass down in front of him. He stared at it for a moment before looking at her. "You know, dates are easier when the women don't know how to psychologically sidestep my idiosyncrasies."

They listened to the speeches, and each time they were to drink, Tony left his champagne on the table.

"Do you not like it?" Pepper asked.

He shrugged. "Drinking's not really my thing anymore."

She stared at him for a moment before the pieces clicked together. "Oh my god, you're a—"

"Let's not say the words out loud right now," he requested quietly.

She nodded as she gave a quick glance around the room to see if anyone was obviously listening in on their conversation. "But I asked you to get me a drink," she whispered.

"Technically, I asked *you* if you wanted one."

She rolled her eyes at his distinction. "And I handed you a drink."

"Which I didn't touch."

"And I've been drinking around you."

"Pepper," he said with an amused grin, "you are not going to drive me back into the arms of a bottle. It's okay."

She shook her head, disappointed at herself. "But I'm a counselor; I should've noticed beforehand and been more—"

"Dance with me."

Her head jerked in an attempt to process the sudden change in conversational direction. "What?"

He rose smoothly from his seat and extended a hand out to her. "You feel guilty; make it up to me with a dance."

Pepper nervously put her hand in his and let him lead them out to the dance floor. A slow standard played as Tony pulled her close to but not completely up against him. She did her best to suppress the flush of heat on her face from his hand coming to rest on her bare back, but was apparently unsuccessful.

"You alright?" he asked.

She wanted to say no, because the wine from dinner, martini right after, and champagne from the toast were starting to hit her in a heated, heady way. "I just... There's all these fancy people who know you, and I'm here with you. And I'm wearing this stupid, backless dress. And I—"

"First of all," he interrupted, "no one's going to be paying attention to me when you look the way you do, which is gorgeous. Really—that dress is a work of art. I think it should be the new school uniform." Her blush deepened, and she internally cursed her pale skin. "Second, I could not care less about nearly everyone in this room. I just came because the groom is the nephew of a former business partner, and you look better in heels than Bruce. Don't ask me how I know that; at least not until the third date."

They stayed for a few more dances and a slice of cake each before making their way out to the parking lot and hopping back in Tony's car, which probably cost more than all the vehicles on the farm in Virginia combined. He walked her to her door and they both did the awkward shuffle of not knowing exactly how to end things. There were halted opening lines of conversation until he reached up to rest his hand on the side of her face. Leaning in, he grazed his lips against the corner of her mouth. He barely pulled away before thanking her for the company, his goatee tickling her skin and the heat of his breath causing her heart to quicken. Her eyes fluttered open long enough to look at his, and she noted for the first time just how many shades of gold and brown formed his eye color and felt a simultaneous appreciation and jealous for his long eyelashes.

"See you Monday," he said before giving her one last smile and walking away.

"So, uh, here's the thing."

Bruce made a little noise in the back of his throat without looking up from the newspaper, which figured. They'd planned on going bowling after their meeting, but the yearly senior league championship forced them back out into the cold. They'd considered a movie, but the theater looked packed, and Bruce'd complained that the only thing he'd do at Barnes & Noble was buy books (kind of the point, there, Banner), so they'd just headed for their usual stomping ground for milkshakes and the crossword puzzle. Tony'd started the thing, and leaving Bruce to go all scrunch-faced at some of the harder clues while Tony stirred his milkshake.

"Banner."

"Stark?"

"I'm trying to, like, spill my soul here, nobody needs a five-letter word for 'holy handouts that bring you closer to god.'"

"That'd be 'tithes'—and six letters."

"You know, I could've had my pick of ex-drunk best friends and I can still reevaluate my initial choice." Bruce laughed and lifted his head, and Tony flicked his straw wrapper at him. Bruce immediately retaliated, leading to a tabletop littered with tiny balled-up pieces of straw wrapper and napkin.

Tony was dipping another couple balls in condensation from his glass to make sanitary spitballs when Bruce said, "I thought you wanted to spill your soul."

Tony stopped. He stopped and stared at his tiny arsenal, because that avoided meeting Bruce's eyes. Their meeting'd started late and then went on for a half-hour longer than usual, and it'd given Tony a lot of extra time to think. Not that he needed it—his thoughts usually raced around his head NASCAR fast—but tonight, for some reason, it'd all kind of piled together.

And then their main sharer, an older guy, spent his time talking about gratitude and about being able to look the gifts life tossed your way right in the face and saying *thank you* for every last one of them. He'd talked about his wife giving him a thousand second chances and—

Bruce raised both eyebrows. "Tony?" he asked quietly.

"I think I might actually be wholly in love with Pepper Potts," Tony blurted, all the words rushing out at once.

For a second, Bruce froze, and once that second broke, he blinked slowly. Very slowly, almost suspiciously slowly, like he was trying to force the surprise out of his expression. Tony sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "You know what? Never mind. Never mind, I didn't say anything, absolutely *no* confessions of—"

"Did you only now realize?" Bruce cut him off. Tony jerked his head up from where he'd gone back to staring at the table to find Bruce watching him carefully. He must have looked pretty shocked, too, because Bruce immediately smiled. "I'm sorry," he continued, "I just assumed you already decided that, the way you are with her."

"Uh, sorry, what?"

"I've seen you with other women. I've seen the way you talk about them, the way you treat them. Pepper's different." Bruce shrugged slightly. "Really, you've been different from the time you started dating her."

"Technically, I never started dating her," Tony pointed out, leveling a finger across the table at his friend. "I saw her repeatedly until she started occasionally spending the night in my bed and showing me her matching sets of—"

"I really don't need to picture your girlfriend's underwear, Tony."

"You would if you could see her in them," Tony returned, and earned a soft Bruce-chuckle.

Soft, but short-lived, and it left Tony sitting there, rubbing his hand across his goatee while Bruce gingerly sipped his milkshake. "I don't think I'm the different one," he said after a couple seconds. Bruce glanced over at him. "I mean, I get your point, but it's just— It's *her*. You know? I spent all these years chasing after the hottest girl in the room. Which isn't to say that Pepper's not hot,

because she's *incredible*, but there's something—" He waved a hand in the air, trying to force the words to materialize, but they evaded his grasp. "You know what I did last Saturday morning?"

"No, but if this is about underwear again—"

"Nice try, but those pictures are in a very special folder on my cell phone." Bruce rolled his eyes, but Tony leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "I spent three hours browsing these absolutely ridiculous weekend getaways. Like, wine tours in Sonoma for over spring break. Which is stupid because, first, I hate those kinds of things, and second, because I don't even know if she'll still want to be with me in another, what, three months? Four? I quit math years ago, whatever." He dismissed the numbers with a flap of his hand while Bruce snorted and shook his head. "And afterward, I sat there. For, like, an hour, staring at a hotel room I was too chicken shit to book because I didn't know whether this hot, smart, special girl who is absolutely amazing to me would want to still be with me in the longer run."

Bruce's enigmatic little smile nudged at the corners of his mouth. Tony hated that smile, because he always followed it up with some extra-intelligent, extra-salient point. "And you knew you were in love," Bruce finished.

"No. But when Henrik or Hester or whatever his name was tonight—"

"Alex?"

Tony waved him off. "He talked about all the ways life gives you gifts and how we don't ever appreciate the gifts the way we should, and I just kept thinking, the whole time he talked, that I maybe don't appreciate Pepper. Or that I don't let her know that she's important, that I don't—"

"She knows, Tony," Bruce said quietly, and Tony stopped running fingers through his hair to stare over at his friend. The enigmatic smile'd disappeared sometime in the last couple seconds and turned into something a lot softer.

Tony, appropriately, scoffed at it. "Really? Because last time I checked, I was a horny playboy who just happened to hang out with school kids 180 days out of the year."

"And that's how she knows." Tony rolled his eyes, but Bruce just kept smiling placidly at him.

"Tony, your reputation isn't exactly subtle. I guarantee you she got more than one motherly warning from the other women at work—and if she didn't, you've taken her to events where people know the old Tony. If she hasn't heard the stories, she at least suspects their content."

"All the more reason for her to think she's another notch on the bedpost."

"Or for her to *know* she's different," Bruce replied. "You haven't gone out with any other women since you met her. You haven't stumbled into any one-night-stands. You've been her boyfriend." Tony tried to ignore the way that term ground its heel into the softest part of his stomach. Luckily enough, he could stir his milkshake and avoid Bruce's eyes. "That's how I knew she was special to you—and why I suspected this was serious."

"Because I didn't screw around on her?"

"Because, as far as I could tell, you've never even considered it."

Tony huffed a breath at that one but decided to let Bruce have the last word for once, watching as the other man went back to his crossword puzzle and ultimately left the elephant in the room alone. When it came time to pay, he tossed down the cash for the milkshakes on top of Bruce's now-finished puzzle and drove them back to the church parking lot in absolute silence. Bruce thanked

him, Tony nodded, and they parted ways like that: quieter than usual, maybe, but not totally unheard of in their years of friendship.

On his way home, Tony thought about the time he'd spent with Pepper: their first date at the wedding reception, the dinners out and random art shows since then, the one horrible night at the opera where the woman on Pepper's other side got drunk out of her mind and nearly hurled on Pepper's shoes. He thought about the first time Pepper spent the night, about the way her shampoo smelled the first time he woke up at her place while she was in the shower, the way she looked barefoot and grinning at him in the mornings. It felt stupid to admit, but Bruce was right: ever since that first night out, he'd never considered screwing around on Pepper Potts, or replacing her with anybody else.

Which was probably why she flung open her door with the force of ten tornados after she spied him through the peephole. "Tony?" she demanded, wide-eyed and worried-looking. She wore ratty pajamas, her hair back in a messy bun, and she looked like the greatest thing Tony'd ever seen in his entire life. "Are you okay? I thought you were with Bruce, I—"

"I wanted to see you," he blurted, because he knew she'd ask a hundred more questions if he didn't stop her. Her shoulders softened, but she didn't unclench her fingers from the doorknob. The worry etched itself over her face like the fine lines from a woodcarving; Tony only realized he was smoothing them away with his fingers after his hand was on her face and tracing the shape of her cheekbone. "I— I wanted to see you, I don't know why, but I did."

"Tony," she murmured, "are you sure—"

"Call it an exercise in gratitude or something," he cut her off. "Bruce'll tell you, we learned all about gratitude tonight, I'm just trying it on for size."

She peered at him for a few seconds, her lips slowly pressing into one very severe, very tight line. "I feel like I missed something," she said, the nerves staring to slowly dissipate.

"You are surprisingly not alone in that," he replied, and waited until she cracked the barest of smiles to smile back at her.

"Can we talk?"

Pepper glanced up from the shoes she was ostensibly picking out for her wedding—yes, her wedding—to see Bruce Banner hovering at the start of the department shoe aisle, hands in his pockets. He'd come along to babysit Tony before they went to the courthouse, or so the story went, but it didn't surprise Pepper that he'd already beaten a hasty retreat. Tony was high-strung in his calmest moments, and today—

Today was a whole different story.

She smiled and held up two shoes. "Thoughts?" she asked. Bruce eyed the gold one with obvious suspicion, so Pepper chuckled and put it back. "Don't worry, I agree completely. I just thought Tony'd like them."

"Tony'll like them as long as you're taller than him."

"I'm taller than him in almost any heels."

"Then you're fine." She watched Bruce crack a tiny grin as she pulled the box with the strappy silver shoes—all wrong for winter, but all right for the price (and being able to wear them to future

events Tony dragged her too)—off the shelf. He continued to hover as she put them on. "Betty always asked my advice," he admitted after a few seconds. "I was never very helpful."

"You're probably more helpful than Tony."

"That's not a high bar, I don't think."

"You're not wrong about that." She glanced up at him from her place on the bench; he shifted his weight subtly from one foot to the other. "Is something wrong?"

"I—" he started, but hesitated. In the relatively short time she'd known Bruce Banner, she'd discovered he was a man of few words. When he spoke to anyone besides Tony, what he said was either important or subtly, almost subversively funny. But with Tony, he sometimes morphed into an entirely different person, full of laughter and a spark she never quite saw at any other time.

She was grateful for his and Tony's friendship the instant she discovered it, and even more now.

She watched Bruce wet his lips. "I need to make sure you're doing this for the right reasons," he finally said.

Pepper blinked. "Didn't Tony tell you—"

"Yes," Bruce interrupted, playing idly with his watch strap. "And I know you both mean well, with the test and everything, but I, uhm." He swallowed before he raised his eyes to meet hers. "He won't be okay if this doesn't work."

She shook her head slightly, but caught herself watching the shoes instead of him. "He's Tony," she reminded him. "Not that we think this won't work out, but if it doesn't, I have no doubt he will bounce back immediately and probably with someone we've met."

"He won't." She glanced up, surprised by the absolute certainty on Bruce's face. He dragged his fingers through his hair and then walked over to join her on the small bench in the middle of the shoe aisle. "I've known him for a long time. We're, uh, brothers, in a way. I mock him for saying that, and programming it into his cell phone, but I sometimes think he's the only person who really understands me. And maybe vise-versa." He looked over and held her eyes. "He loves you."

"I know. I love him, too."

"He loves you in a way I've never seen him love, Pepper. And I think, if it falls apart— Tony's lost a lot, in his life. I'm not sure what would happen if he added you to that list."

Pepper cast her eyes down at her feet, spreading her toes to check how they fit, but she knew somehow that Bruce saw it for the distraction it was. The last week before winter break had turned into an unexpected whirlwind of emotions: the positive test, Tony's proposal, the sudden phone calls from no fewer than three bridal boutiques offering her the opportunity to shop there at her leisure (as though she'd choose a traditional gown and veil for a shotgun wedding). She'd hardly found any time to stop and breathe, which was really for the best; slowing down allowed the tide of doubt to lap at her heels. If nothing else, she had to keep running away from the crashing waves.

She folded her hands between her knees. "Do you know why I told him I'd marry him?"

"I know about the test."

"That's not what I asked." She lifted her head to meet his eyes. "I want to marry him. And I know, in every ten-second span of sanity I have left, that wanting to marry him is *insane*. I'm signing up

for a lifetime of last-minute plans and tiny personal disasters." Bruce's lips twitched, and she shook her head. "I'm not going to go anywhere," she admitted quietly. "I know there'll be times when I want to, and probably times that, by all accounts, I *should*, but I actually want this."

"Okay." Bruce finally smiled at her, soft and sure. "And I hope you know, it's not that I don't trust you, but—"

"But you need to protect your best friend."

He nodded. "He'd do the same for me," he answered, running his hands along the thighs of his slacks. "I told Tony I needed to find the washroom. I'd better get back before he buys the entire tie department in search of the perfect hot-rod red."

"It's probably too late for that," Pepper noted. When he chuckled, though, she cocked her head to one side and tried to bite down on the edges of a smile. "Bruce, did you just give me the 'shovel talk?'"

"Only if it worked," he replied, and lightly knocked their arms together.

He rose from the bench and walked away before Pepper had the opportunity to tell him that she'd never needed the warning, but the conversation stuck with her. She replayed it in her head as she climbed out of the car to go inside and change, as she picked out the right jewelry to go with the new shoes, and as she fought with her makeup and her hair. She'd skipped out on the bridal shops and taken advantage of the holiday season to find a dark green tea-length cocktail dress that belonged more at a Christmas party than a wedding, but how much longer would she be wearing cute cocktail dresses with strappy heels?

And in what world did Tony Stark deserve a bride who was strung up too tight in a traditional white gown?

She drove herself to the courthouse and wandered down the nearly-deserted hallway, grateful that they'd decided to keep this a private affair with Bruce and a court reporter as their sworn witnesses. The butterflies in her stomach threatened to lift her off the floor, and she kept hearing Bruce's voice in the back of her head:

He loves you in a way I've never seen him love.

She realized she should've assured Bruce that the feeling was mutual.

Of course, all the mutual feelings in the world couldn't stop her whole face from flaring red when she stepped into the courtroom and discovered that Tony'd apparently hired a violinist to mark her entrance—and arranged for flowers, too. She stared at the bouquet Bruce handed her, every flower something exotic and brightly-colored, no traditional standards in the mix. She almost commented on it, too, when she realized that Tony had a matching boutonniere on his jacket, and that the violinist was playing the slow song from their first date, all that time ago.

She felt the butterflies in her stomach melt. "Tony, I—"

"I know, lame, right? The flowers, the violin, all Bruce's idea. Threatened me with all sorts of disgusting kindergarten antics I really don't want to repeat." Pepper tried to laugh, but she ended up just staring at the ceiling, willing her eyes to stay dry enough that her makeup wouldn't run. She only managed to look back at Tony after his hands found her waist; they were somehow familiar and new at the same time, and she felt like her breath was rushing out of her chest.

Tony noticed immediately, his fingers curling against her waist. "Please tell me this is a good

almost-swoon, because I'm not really sure the difference right now and I'm afraid that if I tell you you're the most beautiful woman in the world you might actually—"

"It's good, Tony," Pepper somehow managed. The light that burst to life on his face like a firework overwhelmed her, and she felt her eyes wet. "It's— It's really good."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," she promised, and even after she kissed him, she kept their foreheads pressed together, drinking him in.

When the judge asked them whether they wanted to add anything to their vows, Tony'd swallowed thickly and forced out a "no" so helplessly choked that Pepper swore her heart would burst.

But when he asked the same question of Pepper, she smiled. Tony blinked at her, and she squeezed his hands until he squeezed back. Over his shoulder, she could see Bruce watching her, his lips pressed tightly together. The only other time she'd seen Bruce with an expression like that had been at the funeral of one of the school's former students last year, a boy Bruce'd had as a kindergartener.

She knew an overabundance of emotion when she saw it.

"I'm not going anywhere," she told Tony. Her voice shook when he traced his thumbs over her knuckles. "No matter what happens, I'm staying here."

She watched as Tony swallowed for the tenth time in as many minutes and blinked up at the ceiling. "We have to go home eventually," he told her, the words thick and catching in the back of his throat, and he only smiled when she laughed.

Eight hours after their wedding, as they sat cross-legged on Tony's bed and ate much-needed recovery pizza from the twenty-four pizza joint down the road, Tony asked, "Still sure you're not going anywhere?"

And eight days after their wedding, after a long conversation about the incidents of false positive pregnancy tests and a lot of sighs of relief, Pepper laced her arms around his neck and promised, "I'm sure."

Pepper remained in bed for a while after Tony's breathing evened out in his post-coital sleep before slipping from his arms. She grabbed her newest silk robe and wrapped it around herself before quietly exiting the bedroom and making her way downstairs. This robe was plum and stopped at her knees, and with it, Pepper was pretty sure Tony'd provided her with an entire rainbow of silk wraps in various lengths.

Once she made her way to the kitchen, she grabbed a bottle of water. On the counter was the still-opened clamshell jewelry case containing the necklace Tony'd given her after they'd gotten home from their anniversary dinner at the swanky French restaurant downtown. Said necklace featured a ruby-shaped heart surrounded by diamonds with a larger diamond dropping from the heart.

Pepper shook her head as she stared at the thing again. If she wore any jewelry other than her wedding ring and a pair of stud earrings, it was sleek and conservative. Two words that could rarely be used to describe any piece of jewelry Tony'd purchased for her, including her two-year old engagement-but-really-just-straight-to-wedding ring. All his gifts in velvet boxes were ostentatious; she knew this would never change. But she wasn't comfortable with wearing something so extravagant. She certainly couldn't wear it to school, and the times they were out in

public were the times they were photographed. Pepper didn't want people surfing gossip sites to think bling was her thing.

Checking the clock, she saw it was only a little after ten. Normally that would be too late into the night to reach out to her friends, but once teachers hit winter break, their bedtimes usually shifted much later. She snagged her purse from the kitchen island and took out her phone. Snapping a quick picture of the necklace, she texted the image with the caption, *He tried*. A few seconds later, her phone began to vibrate in her hand. She swiped the screen to accept the call.

"Sorry," Phil apologized. "If I'd known it was going to be that gaudy I would've tried to intervene."

"Like you could've changed his mind anyway," Pepper replied. "What am I going to do with this thing?"

The librarian sighed as he considered his answer. "Wear it out a few times, and then hide it in the back of a drawer somewhere."

"I'm going to run out of drawers if this is going to be the typical plan of attack."

"You have a big house, you'll make it work. At least he didn't get you another ridiculously-sized stuffed animal like he did for Christmas right after you got married."

Pepper had enough sense to fake a polite chuckle. Bruce was the only one outside of the Stark household who knew the giant rabbit was supposed to go in a nursery. Tony'd brought it home the same day her blood work contradicted her at-home pregnancy test. The stuffed animal had remained in the otherwise-empty bedroom for another month before Pepper came home to it gone without an explanation. Which was probably for the best, because the only thing more terrifying to Pepper than having a child was having that creepy, seven-foot monstrosity keeping guard over a newborn.

"You there?" Phil's voice sounded in her ear, drawing her out of her memories.

"Sorry, mind wandered for a second. What did you say?"

"I asked if he got you anything else."

Pepper turned to see the new piece hanging on the wall in the living room. "Tradition apparently says the second anniversary is represented by cotton, so he bought me a canvas."

"A blank one? Are you getting back into painting?"

"No, it's a painting that's from the gallery I worked in when I spent a year in Paris."

Phil hummed a note of approval. "Not bad."

Pepper smiled at the canvas. "Not bad at all. There were some other gifts as well, but I'm guessing you don't want to hear about the parts consisting mostly of lace and silk."

"Lace isn't really my thing," Phil returned drily.

She laughed. "Tony's going to find that so disappointing." She laughed even harder when Phil began to groan.

"It's our anniversary," her husband's voice rumbled in her ear from behind. "I'm not allowed to find anything disappointing." Tony grabbed the phone out of her hand, said, "Bye, Phil" loud enough

for the man to hear on the other end of the line, and disconnected the call. "You know," he said as he placed the phone on the counter before grabbing her by the hips and turning her to face him, "if you don't like the necklace, I can get you something else."

"You got me too much already. And I know you have more planned for Christmas presents next week."

He shrugged. "Am I not allowed to lavish the most beautiful woman to ever exist with nice things?"

Pepper rolled her eyes. "I hardly fit that description."

"Of course you do," he answered easily.

She felt her cheeks flame as she ducked her head. He reached around her to snag her water bottle from the counter and drank half of it down before replacing the cap and sliding it back onto the marble surface. "Seriously, if you don't like it, take it back and get something else. Or just go get yourself something else. Whatever."

"Tony, it's fine."

"Just as long as you only regret me buying you that and not marrying me, I'll be happy."

She reached up to place her hand on the back of his neck and pulled him toward her. His face landed in the crook of her shoulder and she nuzzled her cheek against the side of his head. "Never," she answered.

Her breath caught as his goatee scratched against an already sensitive portion of her neck that he'd paid attention to earlier in the evening (and that morning). She knew without looking that his eyes had gone from golden-brown to nearly black as she ran her fingernails down his bare back. He grunted at the touch, hands moving down to her waist.

"Too much clothing," he ground out as he pulled at the sash of her robe.

Winter Break

"I brought you cookies," Tony greeted four days before Christmas, and held up the plate for Bruce to inspect. "Chocolate chip. With pecans. Which I take on good authority are your second-favorite after those tuxedo cookies at the airport bakery."

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "You brought me cookies," he repeated.

"Yes."

"Homemade cookies."

"Also yes."

"That you, Tony Stark, baked yourself."

"Hey, I can bake!" Tony defended. "Baking's just like science, except instead of explosions, you get cookies." He gestured with the plate, as though he'd prove his point by almost dumping all the homemade cookies onto Bruce's front stoop. "Really delicious ones, made with actual butter and holiday love. Now, can I come in or do I have to eat them all myself?"

Bruce sighed, but at least he held the door open.

Inside, Bruce's little house looked exactly like it always did: cluttered but clean, with overflowing bookshelves, stacks of magazines that Bruce really intended to read someday, and a paused documentary on—

"Is that the one about the Third Reich and aliens?" Tony asked, tilting his head at the screen.

"It was that or reruns of Shark Week," Bruce answered, and headed into the kitchen.

Tony nodded, but he kept his eyes open, too. He was on a mission, not that Bruce needed to know that. Winter break guaranteed that Bruce and his mysterious lady friend would be spending extra time dirtying his flannel sheets and keeping Trojan in business. And winter break also guaranteed to be the only time Tony'd be able to appropriately hunt down and talk to this stranger before everything went to extra-sticky friends-with-benefits shit.

He let Bruce take the plate of cookies and then leaned against the countertop in the kitchen. Everything looked normal there, too. "Make you a deal," he said once he'd inspected all the magnets on the fridge. "You make a pot of coffee, I'll pee, and then we'll eat all the cookies and not tell Pepper."

Bruce glanced up from where he was peeling back the plastic wrap on the plate. "Why does it feel like you're the only one benefiting from this 'deal?'"

"Glad you agree!" Tony chirped, and shucked his coat over the back of a kitchen chair before taking off down the hallway toward the bathroom. A quick peek into Bruce's spare room revealed it was the normal collection of half-disorganized piles and old textbooks, and the bathroom looked normal-enough, too. Safe, at least at first blush, but that didn't keep Tony from closing the door behind him, turning the sink on a low trickle, and then rooting through the medicine cabinet.

He found the usual assortment of over-the-counter pain killers, cough medicine, and Neosporin, but no damning evidence of the woman who occasionally shared his best friend's bed. Undeterred,

he dropped down onto his knees and pulled open the cabinet under the sink.

Which was precisely when the bathroom door banged open behind him.

"Hey!" he squeaked, almost banging his head on the underside of the sink as he jerked to his feet. "I could've been doing my business, hanging out for the world to see!"

Bruce raised his eyebrows. His arms were crossed over his chest, his eyes calmly sizing Tony up. "I do know what penises look like," he noted.

"Other people's, maybe. Your own, sure. But mine? Mine would overwhelm you with its majesty and you'd never be whole again. In fact, you would be a shallow husk of a man, blinded by the glory of my *amazing*—"

"Tony," Bruce interrupted blandly.

"Bruce?"

"Even if you were to find my condoms, I don't keep the name of the person I'm sleeping with tucked up in the box next to the instructions."

Tony forced himself to smile serenely, but he knew from the way that Bruce's lips twitched into a smirk that he'd already played every card in his guilty hand. "Maybe I needed—uh—" He glanced into the cabinet under the sink to discover the only items down there were a garbage can, a roll of toilet paper, and a bottle of shampoo. "You'll tell me eventually," he finally said.

"You hope," Bruce replied, and wandered back out of the room.

Steve pulled into Bucky's parking lot just in time to see the other man toss his suitcase into the trunk of his car and slam the door down. Grabbing a bag and the untouched coffee, he climbed out of his car and shouted Bucky's name, then jogged up to him with a smile. "I was hoping to catch you before you took off."

Bucky grinned back easily. "You're lucky I slept through my alarm. My ma, on the other hand, is going to be furious with me."

"Well, here," Steve said extending his hands to offer goodies. "Just in case you skipped breakfast."

Bucky let out a nearly obscene moan when he looked inside the paper bag to find a few glazed peach rolls from Sheila's bakery. "You're amazing, but please tell me that you didn't drive this far out to shower me with food."

Steve shook his head. "I'm okay."

"Okay would be bringing me a twinkie and gas station coffee, this—"

"No," Steve chuckled. He could feel the grin he'd been repressing since he pulled into the parking lot split his face again. "I mean my test results came back—I'm okay."

Steve watched as the news changed Bucky's face from one of shock to matching delight. The man hastily put his bag of muffins and paper cup of coffee onto the ground before grabbing the lapels of Steve's pea coat and pulling him in for a hard kiss. "Told ya'," Bucky bragged when they pulled apart.

Steve puffed a laugh into the cold December wind. "That you did." He swept his thumb back and

forth on the spot just above Bucky's right hip. "Thank you." Bucky shrugged the words off, and Steve tightened his hold of him just a bit. "I'm serious. I dumped all of that on you when I probably shouldn't have, but I was too scared and caught up in it all to stop. You didn't have to be as nice and supportive as you were. Thank you."

The corner of Bucky's mouth twitched upwards, but he didn't fight the gratitude this time. Instead, he shrugged. "That's what guys do for their boyfriends."

Steve felt his eyebrows rise a bit at the term. "Is that what we are?" he asked quietly.

Bucky ducked his head. "Now who's the one dumping words they shouldn't be?"

"As long as you're not dumping me," Steve told him.

That brought Bucky's eyes back up. "No, absolutely not. You bring me peach-flavored baked goods. How could I dump someone who does that?"

"Well, I only stopped by originally since you were on my way down to my mom's."

"But now?" Bucky challenged with a smug smile.

"Now," he said before nuzzling a cold nose against Bucky's reddened cheek, "I'm telling my boyfriend thank you and that I hope he has a great Christmas at home with family."

"You are obviously an only child, or at the very least, sisterless."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Bucky breathed, the air a warm welcome against Steve's face. "My sisters are going to be relentless. If I don't answer my phone, just know it's because they're holding it hostage. And if you get any weird texts—again, them not me."

"Good to know," Steve chuckled. "So, that means it's okay if I call you?"

"You do remember I used the term 'boyfriend,' right?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure it's rare for your whole family to be in one place at the same time. I don't want to interrupt anything."

Bucky snuck a quick kiss. "Not interrupting anything."

They kissed again, this time more languid, and they didn't stop until Bucky's phone began to ring. He pulled away with growl. "Speaking of interrupting." He accepted the call. "Hey, Ma." Steve could hear Bucky's mother talking, but couldn't quite make out the words. "Define 'left'," Bucky said. "Left the apartment? Yes. Left town? Not yet... Yes, Ma," Bucky answered with a sparkle in his eyes, "I have a very good excuse. Yeah, yeah, fine. Leaving now. See you by dinner."

"Sorry for delaying you," Steve apologized.

"I'm not." They gave into the contact once more until Bucky reluctantly pulled away a couple of minutes later. "Okay, I really have to go, or Ma's going to kill me."

"And you don't want your coffee to get any colder."

"Worth it," Bucky said with a wink as he picked his breakfast off the asphalt. "I'll text you when I get in. Have a good Christmas with your mom."

"You too."

"Pepper. Pepper, listen I know you think— See, okay, the yelling? The yelling isn't sexy. The yelling makes me think you're not listening to me, for one, and distracts me from picturing you in lingerie."

Tony flinched and pulled the phone away from his shoulder, half because Pepper's yelling had increased in volume and half because a light had gone on in the house across the street from where he was parked. The street lights cast a dim glow on the asphalt of the street and the front yard across the way, but to see the silhouettes of bodies in the front window required binoculars.

Luckily, Tony'd come prepared.

In his defense, he'd always planned to make it home in time to have dinner with Pepper's horrible brother and his horrible children on their overnight stop-over before they headed to a (child-filled, noise-filled, awful) Christmas in Virginia, but everything'd unraveled and left him here, sitting in his car, completing the mission. Not that Pepper wanted to hear anything about missions. No, right now, Pepper wanted to yell.

Apparently, her brother'd been in very rare form and all without Tony there to pick up some of the snarking slack.

"Pepper— Honey, please, just listen to me for a second, then if you want to lop my head off with a machete, I won't even stop you." He tucked the phone into the cradle of his shoulder and adjusted the binoculars. In the front room, the drapes flickered. "The lines at the mall were stupid-long. No, seriously, every last one, every jewelry counter packed tight with people, I couldn't— Yeah, I get it, jewelry can't really buy forgiveness since I missed dinner with Jack and the kids, and I'm sure I'll be paying for that in some unsubtle way later. But, I mean, what would you rather have right now: a husband who missed dinner to buy you presents, or a husband who sat through dinner with an asshole who never really liked him anyway?"

The fever-pitch of Pepper's response almost caused Tony to drop both the phone and the binoculars. He grimaced and tried to twist his head away, but not before the drapes in the house across the street parted. All of Tony's attention dropped away from Pepper's rant and onto his mission objective: specifically, the slightly-slouchy, messy-haired man wearing pajamas and standing in his window.

The smiling, slouchy, messy-haired, waving man, who seemed to know Tony was there and—

"Son of a bitch!" he swore, and then blinked when he recognized Pepper's shout of anger. "No, no, Pepper, no, I was *not* talking about your brother. No, that was incidental, an accident, I— Can you just let me come home and explain? I swear, if I explain, you'll think I'm crazy but not evil and I'll make it up to you in all sorts of interesting positions, just— Pepper, c'mon, it's *not* what you think —"

Across the street, Tony caught Bruce laughing at him.

He therefore felt no shame about flipping him off before he drove away.

Christmas Eve became Clint's favorite day of the year when he married Phil. Well, one of his favorite days—October 12th was kind of hard to beat.

But Christmas Eve was the day they got together with the extended Coulson family. They

exchanged presents that could cost no more than three dollars, gorged on Judy's cooking, and attended the candlelit service at church.

Per usual, they got home late that Christmas Eve. Phil carried a half-asleep Birdie into the house while Clint cleared out the car's trunk of presents and leftovers. Once everything was tucked under the tree or crammed into the fridge, his feet led him out to the main living room. He sank onto the couch, still in his winter coat and boots, and stared at the white lights glowing from the Christmas tree.

The furniture in their little living room always had to be completely rearranged to make room to properly showcase the holiday decorations, but Clint never minded. There weren't too many Christmas trees in his childhood, and what few were there were never covered in little mementos like the one before him. On its branches was a hodgepodge of ornaments. In the Stark household, the gigantic tree (the largest one of several in the house) was tastefully decorated in a theme Pepper established. It was a sight to behold, a true work of art. The Coulson Christmas tree looked positively Charlie Brown in nature when compared to the festive display Pepper orchestrated, and Clint loved it all the more because of that.

The tree itself wasn't particularly shabby in appearance, but the mismatch of ornaments made it look like the ugly stepsister of the Stark tree. But Clint's life was a series of mismatches, so he didn't mind.

Hanging from the branches were a number of ornaments from Phil's childhood, a series of classroom crafts displaying their school pictures (including the year nearly everyone on staff wore a fake goatee to poke fun at Tony) or pictures of Birdie, and knickknacks they'd picked up on their vacations during the summer or for their anniversary. Nothing matched, and yet it was wholly them.

There were no ornaments from Clint's childhood. If the Bartons had a tree for that December, they stuck to nothing more than stringing popcorn and their mom making a star out of aluminum foil.

This, more than any other time of the year, was when Clint found his thoughts drifting towards his relatives. Memories including his dad pretty much sucked, so he tried to convince his brain to skip right over those, but that rarely worked. He tried to focus on how his mom would make pancakes on Christmas morning, a tradition he made sure to carry on. And while staring at the twinkle lights, he always found himself wondering where Barney was—if he was safe and warm, if there was a roof over his head, if he was in trouble, if he was wondering the same things about Clint.

"Take your coat off and stay awhile," Phil told him as he bent down to nuzzle behind Clint's ear. He placed a kiss there before coming around the sofa and sinking down next to him. He'd already changed into a t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants.

"Where's Bird?" Clint asked, eyes locked on the tree.

"Asleep in her bed in our room. Even though the kids are bigger and don't chase her around all the time now, she still gets worn out playing with them."

"We do have an incredibly lazy dog-child."

Phil snickered before staring his husband down. "You okay?" Clint shrugged his answer. "Good or bad memories?"

"Bit of both."

"Anything I can do to help?"

A huff of a quiet chuckle escaped him as he turned towards Phil. "You've already done more than I ever thought anyone could do."

The corner of Phil's mouth pulled up slightly into one of the many versions of a smile that Clint'd catalogued and treasured over the years. "Pancakes in the morning?"

"Of course," Clint answered. "You got real bacon this time, right? None of that turkey crap?"

"Sorry for trying to be healthy."

He rolled his eyes. "It's Christmas, Phil. Santa won't come if we don't eat real bacon."

"I don't think that's how it works," Phil laughed.

"Well, then insert a joke here about the quality of bacon being proportional to the quality of other people coming," he retorted with a waggle of his eyebrows. Phil gave him a good-natured and mandatory eye roll before giving into Clint and leaning into his space to steal a kiss. "After midnight—Merry Christmas," Clint announced as his eyes flickered over Phil's shoulder to check the clock on the wall.

"You too. You going to be up for a while?"

"Probably, mind is being a little too loud for me to go to sleep right now."

Phil nodded. "I'll stay up with you."

"You drove both ways today, go to bed."

"And have you fall asleep out here and never make it to bed? Not my idea of how I want to wake up on Christmas morning."

Clint smirked as he turned his focus back on the tree. "What if I promise to drag my maudlin ass to bed before I fall asleep?"

"What if I just stay out here with you?" Phil countered. "Unless you want to be alone." Clint shook his head at that. "Okay, then. Take off your coat, it's scratchy. And get your damn boots off my coffee table."

"Pretty sure I'm the one who refinished that thing."

"Pretty sure it was still mine before I met you."

Clint rose and draped his coat and scarf over the armchair nearby, tossed his boots toward the front door (ignoring Phil's request not to make them thud so loud and wake up the dog, who would think it was time to play), and stripped out of the button down and slacks he'd worn to the family function. He half-heartedly tossed the last two items toward the hamper still sitting out by the entry into the kitchen.

"You know those are clean clothes, right?" Phil asked.

"Then it's a good thing I missed and they're on the floor."

Phil shook his head. "Why do I put up with you?"

"Because I'm great in bed."

Clint rearranged himself to stretch out on the couch while Phil pulled an afghan from the little closet in the hallway that led back to their bedroom. Once the blanket was secured, Phil placed his glasses on the end table and snuggled himself half on top of his husband. Clint helped him pull the blanket over both of them once they found a comfortable position.

"This is going to kill my back," Phil muttered into Clint's shoulder.

"Quit whining, old man," Clint shot back before nuzzling a kiss into Phil's hair. "You know that if you want shower sex all you have to do is ask. You don't have to sleep on the couch to get it."

They snuggled into the dips and curves of each other's bodies out of habit more than anything, and Clint returned his gaze to the lights on the tree. "Love you," he whispered. "Merry Christmas."

"Mister Stark?" a voice asked, and Tony dropped the receiver to the payphone so quickly, you'd think it was made entirely from snakes and positive pregnancy tests.

Behind him in the mall lobby stood a tall, gangly boy in very tight jeans and a bright orange cardigan, and he stared at Tony like they'd once met in another life. His clothes, mannerisms, and awful Justin Bieber haircut were totally unfamiliar, but his face half-hidden by the haircut reminded Tony vaguely of—

Faux Hawk! Of course, one of his favorite former students and overall little pricks.

Faux Hawk, whose real name was— Wait, okay, he knew this, he *swore* he knew this, it was—

"Mister Stark?" the kid repeated, and looked at Tony like he thought maybe the teacher was having a stroke.

"Hey, kid!" Tony greeted, and forced a grin before the whole thing turned even more awkward. "Look at you! Time flies, right?" The kid's face burst into an overwhelmingly genuine grin. God, to be that young again. "You must be, what, sixteen now? Seventeen? Old enough for me to feel *really* old?"

Faux Hawk laughed and swept his hair out of his eyes. "I just turned seventeen."

"Seriously?"

"Swear to god."

"Yeah, okay, definitely old enough to make me feel old," Tony returned, and the kid laughed again. Tony glanced at his watch and then rested his hands on his hips. "So, okay, seventeen. You're looking at colleges, right? I mean, I know my teenage years were a little wonky, but I take it on pretty good authority that that's what kids do, these days."

"I'm looking at some fine arts schools, yeah," Faux Hawk replied with a shrug. "It's like, okay, my art teacher thinks I'm weird every time I say this, but I think mixed media artists are the Michelangelos of our time, and I really want to get in on that. I mean, with the world as an inspiration, how could I not, right?"

Tony forced a smile. "Right, yeah," he answered, and scratched his fingers through his hair. It was the day after Christmas, the worst day to be in the mall, and here he was, trapped with a kid who wanted to talk his ear off about *Michelangelos of our time*. Pepper'd laugh so hard that her stomach

hurt, but then, Pepper'd gone out with a friend from college and left Tony to, quote, "call Bruce and find something else to do."

But Bruce'd begged off having lunch with him, and now, wasn't answering calls from strange phone numbers. Meaning he was probably with the mystery woman *right now*, and if Tony could only get him to pick up the damn phone in between heavy breathing sessions, maybe—

The payphone started to beep from where it was hanging, and Tony swore under his breath as he turned around to hang it up. "You okay?" Faux Hawk asked once his former teacher slammed it a bit too hard back into the cradle.

"Yeah, no, I—" Tony started to answer, then squinted at the kid. "My cell phone died," he lied, flashing his most charming smile. "I need to call my wife, let her know I'm going to be late—"

"You have a *wife*?" Faux Hawk demanded, staring.

"—for dinner, but the stupid payphone just ate my last couple quarters. You wouldn't happen to have a cell phone I could borrow for, like, ten seconds, would you?"

Faux Hawk eyed Tony suspiciously, like he thought maybe this was a trick, and then dug into his pocket. "Here," he said, and Tony thanked him, repeatedly and loudly, before taking it and dialing Bruce's number. He pressed it to his ear and listened to it ring through, all the way to the stupid *Hi, you've reached Bruce* voicemail chirping, and—

He was just about to hang up when his own cell phone, most certainly not dead and nestled lovingly in his pocket, chimed loudly. He flinched, hoped that he hadn't broadcast the flinch to Faux Hawk, and quickly recorded a very fake-sounding message about volunteering at the Humane Society and therefore coming late to dinner. Bruce'd accuse him of speaking in tongues later.

When he handed the phone back, Faux Hawk was frowning. "I thought your phone was dead."

"Uh, Christmas miracle," Tony answered, and forced a smile. "Good luck on fine arts and everything. If you, you know, want tips or whatever, my wife's into art, she could probably help you out."

"Sure." If the kid'd sounded any less impressed, Tony would've handed him the Oscar for worst performance of all time. "I'll see you around, Mister Stark."

Tony waved goodbye and watched the kid retreat before he remembered about the text message. Except when he pulled out his phone, he groaned aloud.

Platonic Science Life Partner: *I went to a movie, Tony.*

a sexy movie? Tony texted back.

He could practically hear the eye-roll when Bruce replied, *Just a normal movie, but I'll be sure to let you know the next time I do have sex. Just in case you wanted to track it on your phone.*

is there actually an app for that?

I'm turning off my phone now, Tony.

"Hey," Bucky greeted, once he was sure the back door closed.

In a lot of families, the day after Christmas was almost a holiday onto itself, promising lots of leftovers, excellent post-Christmas shopping deals, and maybe a second set of relatives stopping by with well-wishes. In the Barnes household, however, it mostly involved board games, arguing, and watching the reruns of mediocre holiday movies.

Which was why, after a long period of consideration, Bucky ducked out onto the back porch to call Steve.

Steve's chuckle immediately staved off the winter chill that threatened to cut through Bucky's sweater and jeans. "Would you believe me if I said I was just about to call you?"

"I don't know," Bucky admitted, leaning against one of the support beams. "Kinda sounds like a line a guy might use. 'Hey, baby, I was just thinking about calling you.'"

"Hey, I never said 'baby,'" Steve defended.

"I heard you thinking it."

"Even if I was, I'm not sure a phone call is the right time to use the first pet name."

"Saving it for a special occasion?" Bucky teased.

"Maybe," Steve answered, and Bucky tried to ignore the knot in his stomach at the way Steve's voice dropped into a throatier version of itself.

Steve'd called briefly on Christmas Eve, seizing the couple hours before his Christmas Eve service and Bucky's to wish him a Merry Christmas while both of them danced around terms like "I miss you." It was silly, Bucky knew, to feel like the relationship had shifted just from the news of Steve's health and the use of the term "boyfriend," but— Well, Bucky'd watched his sisters reenact the awful church Christmas play in the living room once they got home, so maybe "silly" was encoded in the Barnes DNA. Either way, watching his older sisters bicker with their husbands over the usual family brunch had put him in a weird mood, and hey.

They'd agreed that calling didn't constitute interrupting, right?

(He looked forward to the part of the relationship when he stopped worrying about his feelings so damn often.)

"So," he said after a few seconds, picking up the line of conversation before they started listening to one another breathe, "did you get your pony? Because rumor had it you'd been a good boy all year, and I'd hate finding out that Santa screwed you over with another bag of gym socks."

Steve laughed, his reply half-swallowed by laughter and half-swallowed by the back door banging open. Bucky almost slipped on the icy patch on the porch as all four of his sisters streamed out *en masse*. Worse, he saw his mom peeking out through the kitchen window.

"Did you seriously just sneak away to call the lover-boy?" Kristin demanded, her hands resting on her hips. "Are you fifteen all over again and afraid Lainey'll steal him?"

"I never stole any of Jamie's boyfriends," Lainey defended.

"No, but you stole a bunch of his friends of the male persuasion," Rebecca pointed out.

"Shut up, Becky, you were barely out of diapers, how would you know?"

"Uh, give me a minute," Bucky quickly told Steve, and he moved the phone away from his ear. Attempting to hear any response from the other man seemed futile, now that his sisters were in full-on bicker mode. Well, at least Lainey and Rebecca were bickering; Kristin was still staring him down, while Tammy—

"Where did you hide your phone, anyway?" Tammy asked, and Bucky side-stepped her before she could pluck it away from where he'd nestled it against his chest. He knew without a second thought that Steve would be hearing literally all of the conversation. "We looked for it in your room and where you used to hide all your porn—"

"What porn?" Bucky sputtered. He felt his face flush pink.

"Jamie," Lainey chided, finally ending her argument with Rebecca. "You were a teenage boy in a house full of girls. We knew all your favorite hiding places."

"And then some," Rebecca intoned.

"I don't want to know how you figured it out," Bucky retorted. He glanced down at his phone and shook his head. "Can you just give me five minutes? I promise to make myself available for all the torture you've cooked up once I'm off the phone."

"With your boyfriend," Tammy prompted.

He swallowed. "With the guy who's maybe my boyfriend, yeah," he admitted.

The sisters squealed in perfectly-timed unison delight, and Bucky sighed. They stayed huddled on the porch, though, so he stepped off into the frost-damp yard as he pressed the phone back to his ear. "I don't know how much of that you heard," he said without even asking if Steve was still on the other end, "but I am so, *so* sorry for any and all of it."

Steve's chuckle still sounded warm, which was a good sign. "I suddenly don't mind that I never had any siblings."

"You're *lucky* you never had any— Oh god." And as the chorus of *Bucky and Steve, sitting in a tree* rose up from the porch, Bucky trudged further down the lawn. "You want four sisters? You can have them, free of charge."

"They sound, uh, fun," Steve said after a long pause. It happened to coincide with the sisters' chant ending.

Bucky snorted. "You're a horrible liar, Rogers," he replied over the kissing noises Lainey insisted on making.

"I never claimed otherwise. But good thing I'm cute, right?"

Bucky felt his face flare red. "You can say that again."

"Good thing—"

"Hilarious," he deadpanned, and Steve's laughter on the other end warmed his gut as much as his face. "You'll regret saying that when you meet them, you know. They can sniff out fear like a dog. The first glimpse of trouble, they'll go in for the kill."

Even without being able to see Steve's smile, Bucky swore he could feel it. "And if it turns out that the only 'trouble' is how much I genuinely like you?" he asked.

Bucky's stomach dropped like a rock into the ocean. "Then they might declare you a keeper and never let you leave."

"If you're planning on introducing me, I can't be doing too badly in that department," Steve replied. Something soft touched the corners of his voice, though, almost shy, and Bucky swallowed.

"After I train you up, we can probably go that route," he admitted, and Steve laughed. "There's the obstacle course, the fitness test, the physical inspection—"

"Is there?" Steve asked, and Bucky ignored the catch in the back of his tone.

"—and the advanced firearms training, but after that— Yeah." He shrugged, not that Steve could see it, and listened to the tail end of Steve's chuckle. "After that, I could see you meeting them, sure."

"I better make sure I pass all your tests, then," Steve replied.

"You're well on your way," Bucky admitted, and he could picture Steve's smile when he laughed again.

"Why are you turning down this street?" Pepper asked on their way back from lunch, two days after Christmas. Because they always stayed in on the holiday itself, they purposely picked a new restaurant to try during the post-holiday rush—and then, if they liked it, to eat a dozen times before they even made it to February. This year's adventure was Ethiopian food, and Tony spent the whole meal begging Pepper to let them hire a private Ethiopian chef.

Now, though, Tony shrugged. "I thought we could look at Christmas lights."

"At three in the afternoon two days *after* Christmas?"

He glanced across the car at her raised eyebrow and completely skeptical look. "Pepper. Pep. Sweetheart. I don't know if maybe the French reeducation camps ruined you, but we live in *America*. People here don't turn their Christmas lights off just because of arbitrary things like the sunrise and the Gregorian calendar."

He watched as her skepticism sharpened and her eyes narrowed. "What are you really up to?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he promised, and turned another corner. The neighborhood was a sleepy one, with cute little bungalow-style houses and yards just big enough for the first of five kids, or whatever people considered when buying homes. Better than that, it happened to be the neighborhood where—

Pepper groaned. "You're ridiculous," she complained as they turned onto Carriage Hill Drive.

Tony smiled serenely. "I don't know what you mean."

"No? We just happen to be driving by Bruce's house in the middle of the day during winter break for— What? Our health?" He shrugged lightly, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched her bang her head against the passenger seat headrest. "He never should've told you he was dating."

"Not dating," Tony corrected. "Fuck-buddying."

"But you think it's dating."

"I think it's going to be *disaster* if we don't pin the hussy down and warn her about his delicate,

wounded, widower-ed heart." Pepper heaved a sigh, precisely timed to when he pulled the car to a stop just across the street from Bruce's house. He shoved the gear stick into park and twisted to look at her. "You'd do the same for any one of your gal pals," he pointed out. "You'd march right up to some unsuspecting boyfriend in full-out hell-in-heels mode and not stop with the verbal beating until he promised to have and to hold." When Pepper opened her mouth to respond, he held up a hand. "I'm just doing the same for Bruce."

"I, unlike you, believe my friends have agency over their own lives," Pepper turned.

"And you, unlike me, didn't meet your friends at meetings specifically designed for messed-up substance abusers to help put their lives back together." She frowned at him, her brow crinkling. "It's my job to have his back, Pepper."

"And it's also your job to let him open himself up again," she said. He tried to roll his eyes and glance away, but she pressed two fingers under his chin and shifted his head back in her direction. "He's in a relationship—even if it's not a traditional one—for the first time since Betty died, Tony. You should be supporting that, not stalking it."

"I am supporting it," he defended. "Provided it's healthy and he doesn't get his heart trampled." Pepper raised an eyebrow. "It's a kind of support," he argued.

"It's fear," she corrected, "and I promise you, Bruce has enough of it that he doesn't need you adding to it." Tony pressed his lips together, and Pepper flattened her palm to his cheek. "Let's go home before he finds us sitting here and knows you're doing this."

"I'm pretty sure he already knows," Tony replied, and stalwartly ignored her groan of *oh, Tony, what have you done?* as he put the car back into gear.

"And then, we'll stay all the way up until the new year starts!" Alva explained, throwing up her hands and nearly smacking Darcy in the face. Seriously, the kid needed some remedial lessons on spatial awareness or something. Darcy steered her fist, filled with pepperoni, back down to the miniature pizza crust she was covering. "And eat candy and sing special new year songs."

"You're pretty much covering the floor with cheese," Darcy informed her. The boys were in the living room, watching *Cars* and arguing loudly enough that Darcy could hear it from the kitchen (but since nobody'd started crying yet, she figured she was safe), but Alva'd wanted to help with their dinners of miniature homemade pizzas.

Or throw all the ingredients around and get sauce in Darcy's hair, but whatever.

Across the kitchen, Alva's uncle Loki replied with a tight, "I see." Darcy resisted her urge to huff and roll her eyes. Loki always managed to suck all the joy out of a room like a greasy-haired Dementor. He was good with the boys, awkward with Alva, and worse—

"You could go home," Darcy reminded him for the twenty-seventh time since he'd shown up a half-hour ago.

"Jane thought you might want to leave," he repeated, also for the twenty-seventh time. His voice was as droll and uninterested as all the other times, too. "Something about sowing the seeds of youth."

Darcy abandoned her efforts on George's pizza ("no sauce, extra cheese, lots of olives") to glare at Loki over her shoulder. "There's no way in— Earmuffs, kiddo." Alva immediately plastered her cheese-covered hands over her ears. "There's no way in hell that Jane used the words 'sowing the

seeds of youth' unless she'd had a half-bottle of wine and was mocking Thor." She nudged Alva with her hip, and the girl returned to her pizza-building. "Gold star, liar, you tried."

"I paraphrased," Loki informed her, sighing.

"Yes. And now that you've paraphrased, you can *get lost*, because New Year's Eve babysitting is my jam and I don't need your sharky features—"

"Sharky?" Loki repeated.

"Uncle Loki's a shark?" Alva asked, and then twisted around on her step-stool to stare at him.

"—ruining our night of food, games, and age-appropriate sparkling beverages. Which I brought, by the way, since you think all you need to babysit these three is your angular face and—"

"Uncle Loki!" Henry cheered, and Darcy snapped her mouth shut as both boys rushed into the kitchen. George was, inexplicably, covered with stickers. Darcy decided she didn't want to know. "Uncle Loki, we want to play the game!"

"The game?" Darcy asked. Sounded suspicious, though mostly because of Loki's involvement.

Loki waved a hand. "It's surely too cold out to play the game tonight."

"But we always play the game!" George protested.

"During the summer and fall, when there's no fear of frigid mud puddles or—"

"It's the new year!" Henry insisted. "We get to stay up late, eat lots of food and candy, drink sparkly stuff—" Darcy smirked in self-satisfaction at that. "—and Mom and Dad won't even know because Darcy keeps secrets!" The self-satisfaction promptly transformed into a full-body flinch. "We can play the game."

Even without looking, Darcy felt Loki's beady eyes on the back of her head. "I don't know . . ."

"Please?" George asked.

"*Pretty* please?" Henry amended.

Darcy set down the can of olives and whirled back around. "Okay, come on," she said, hands on her hips. "This is like when my parents used to spell things out to keep secrets from me. What's 'the game'?"

"It's scary," Alva murmured. When Darcy glanced over at her, she was eating an entire handful of pepperoni.

"It's simply hide-and-go seek at the park down the street," Loki said with another frustratingly dismissive wave of his hand. "Last summer when Jane was away at a conference, Thor let me take the children for an evening. We played through dusk, which apparently made it, to quote Goran, 'funner.'"

"It *was* funner," George defended.

Henry stepped on his toes. "Funner's not a word, stupid."

"*You're* stupid."

"But I know funner's not a word, so—"

"What's that?" Darcy asked, cupping a hand behind her ear. "You want me and Alva to drink all the sparkling cider and grape juice and leave *none* for you guys? Wow, that's so thoughtful." Both boys immediately zipped their lips. Darcy, on the other hand, leveled a long, careful look at Loki. Maybe it was just the lighting, or the fact that the boys were practically clinging to him, but his usual douchebag aura was suddenly a little less pronounced. "You can play the game after we have dinner," Darcy decided.

"Even in the cold?" George asked.

"And the dark?" Henry chimed in.

"I hate the game," Alva muttered.

"Yes, in the cold and the dark. And Alva, we'll be, I don't know, referees or something." Darcy reached over and ruffled her hair. "But food first. 'Cause trust me, if your mom finds out that the only food group we sampled from was 'processed sugars,' I am a dead woman."

The kids gorged on pizza and veggies and then bundled up in coats, hats, mittens, and boots. It was cold out by time they started down the sidewalk, but not frigid, and Alva's whining stopped the second Darcy traded scarves with her (even if Darcy's totally epic TARDIS scarf did trail on the ground a little). Nobody else was out at the park and playground at 7:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve, meaning that she and Alva could sit down on the tallest climbing platform and watch as Loki chased his nephews around in the grass and around the swing sets and slides. He almost looked human, for once, and Darcy hated him a little less.

She was teaching Alva old Girl Scout camp clapping games when her phone chimed.

"It's Mama," Alva guessed.

Darcy rolled her eyes. "Of course it's your mom," she retorted, unlocking the screen. "She probably wants to make sure I didn't feed any of you to the Evertson's Rottweiler for being extra-tasty-crispy — Oh."

Jane: *Darcy, I am so sorry. Thor just told me that Loki's probably going to come by tonight. He wanted him to stop spending New Year's Eve alone. If you want us to come home, I totally understand. I already told him off. Twice.*

Darcy snorted slightly at the message. *nah, it's cool*, she typed back.

"Is it Mama?" Alva asked, craning her neck to see.

"Oh, it's your Mom all right," Darcy replied, and ignored Jane's immediate response of, *Please tell me you didn't kill him and hide his body!*

When the boys (and their uncle) were done huffing and puffing around the park, they walked home. Darcy fixed an enormous pot of hot chocolate while Loki amused the kids with a bunch of lame slight-of-hand tricks that had them totally enraptured. By the time they'd finished off the saucepan of cocoa and an entire bag of marshmallows, all three kids were conked out in various places on the living room floor.

"Paper rock scissors for who drags them all to bed?" Darcy asked, holding out her fist.

Loki's predatory grin made her want to roll her eyes. "You know not what you do."

"I'll be the judge of that," she retorted—and won all three rounds.

Once Loki'd dropped the kids into bed and Darcy'd picked up the disaster areas they left behind (including sweeping up all the pizza ingredients from the living room floor), they found a movie on TV and collapsed on the couch.

"You don't need to stay," Darcy said after the first half-hour. It was 10:30 p.m., a long way from the actual ball drop. "I know Thor put you up to it, and the kids crashed. You could sneak out and nobody'd ever have to know."

Loki snorted lightly. "You've met my brother, yes?"

"Uh, duh?"

"Then you understand that he is like a dog with a bone when an idea overcomes him." He shook his head. "It is apparently inappropriate for someone your age to want to spend New Year's Eve alone—or babysitting for one's friends."

"Yeah, sure," Darcy started to reply, "but I mean— Wait. *Or* babysitting? Thor did this for me, too?"

"I would argue the correct term is 'to' you, since I doubt you agreed to it."

"No offense, but it would take, like, a bottle of booze the size of your head to get me to agree to this." Something like a flinch flickered across Loki's face, and she grimaced. "That came out *way* harsher than I mean it to, I'm just saying—"

"No, I think it's deserved," Loki returned. He stood slowly, and Darcy ground her teeth. She hadn't meant to kick him out—at least, not like that, exactly. "But you've given me an idea."

Loki's idea, it turned out, was sparkling cider mixed with a healthy amount of cinnamon-flavored booze, and was *amazing*. So amazing, in fact, that they forgot about the movie, or the impending new year. At least, until the credits cut to a plastic-faced woman talking about how they were only a minute away from the ball dropping.

Darcy glanced at Loki. He was sprawled back on the couch, his limbs lazy and comfortable, a half-finished glass of his miracle drink dangling from his fingers. She put her own glass down and then twisted around on the couch. "We have to kiss at midnight," she decided.

Loki choked on air, which was pretty hilarious to watch. "Excuse me?" he demanded.

She rolled her eyes. "The world could end tomorrow. I mean, technically, it could end any time: meteors, global warming, impending alien invasion, zombie apocalypse— I can keep going, but we've only got like forty seconds, here."

"You've made your point—I think."

"My point is that, if the world ends tomorrow, I am not going to let my last thoughts include the fact that I skipped out on a New Year's kiss." She shrugged. "And since there's no way I can drive across town to my crush's really creepy little apartment—"

"I am the only available runner-up," Loki surmised. Darcy nodded, and watched as he leaned forward, set his glass on the coffee table, and ran a hand down his shirt. Freshening up? Seriously? God, Darcy already regretted the ten seconds where she'd thought of him as anything but a greasy asshole.

The plastic-faced woman on the television started the countdown from ten.

Loki swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Darcy pushed her hair behind her shoulders.

And then, they kissed.

They kissed, close-lipped and dry, Loki applying way too much pressure and freaking following Darcy's mouth when she tried to make it a little less awkward. When he tipped his head—yeah, like he was getting anything past awkward closed-mouthed kissing, *please*—he banged his pointy nose into hers, and she made a strangled yelping sound. Worse, he apparently took that as a compliment, because he immediately reached for her arm and—

"Nope," Darcy said as she pulled away and then, immediately, scooted all the way to the far end of the couch. She even put her hands up. "Nope, done, failure, the end."

On the other end of the couch, Loki coughed into his fist. "Agreed," he said.

"And we'll never tell Jane and Thor."

"Also agreed."

"Never happened."

"It was, in fact, never considered." When Darcy stole a glance over at Loki, well, at least he was smiling.

But as soon as he got up to refill his glass, Darcy dashed off one and only one text message to Jane: *next year, the only person thor can invite to help me babysit is the cute substitute at the kids' school, the end.*

Match-Making (and Un-Making)

"How do you feel about music?" May Parker asked Wednesday morning.

"Uh," Bruce answered.

All around his classroom were half-finished science stations, little stops in a train of hands-on learning where the kids (with the help of industrious parents arriving after lunch) could try a few experiments without fear of blowing anything up. They'd make tiny baking soda fizzes, create homemade, brightly-colored "gak," and stir salt, sugar, and other powders into warm water—provided Bruce could finish set-up.

And since science with five-year-olds trended toward "messy," most of his remaining set-up involved tablecloths, plastic drop-sheets, and laying out brightly-colored smocks.

And May, for some reason, was hovering, her shoulder propped against the doorjamb.

"I like most music," he finally replied before snapping out another cheap checkered tablecloth. "You'll need to be a little more specific."

"Classical music," May explained. She strode across the room and dropped a brightly-colored ticket in the midst of what would be the gak bowls. "The county chamber orchestra is doing a collection of famous musical canons this weekend. I was supposed to go, but Peter's presenting some photography thing at the college." She waved a hand. "I can't be in two places at once."

Bruce tried not to frown down at the tabletop. "Why me?"

"What?"

"Why would you pick me?" When he glanced at May, he realized her brow was creased in confusion. "You have no reason to think I'd like classical music. I spend most my time with Tony, and the only time he gets anywhere near the stuff is when some Top 40 artist throws it in a back beat." At least that coaxed a chuckle out of the woman. "And you're a lot closer to other people."

She shrugged. "Maybe I wanted to broaden your horizons."

"I'd think you'd want to broaden Carol or Jessica's horizons, first."

"You really think that Carol Danvers would voluntarily attend an orchestra concert?"

"No," he answered, "but I think you'd ask her first."

"Well, you're wrong." He narrowed his eyes at her slightly; he only realized the full effect of expression when May raised her hands in defense. "What?"

"Last week, Monica offered me her ticket to a college basketball game." May snorted, but she crossed her arms, too. The only other time Bruce'd seen her shift her stance that quickly was three years earlier, when she'd denied being Clint's Secret Santa—and tripped in her own spider web of lies. "The week before winter break, Jessica invited me to go bowling with her and a few friends. Carol's repeatedly said she needs to introduce me to 'her friend the science teacher' from the Catholic high school in town." He watched May tighten her arms. The urge to run a hand over his face and scrub his frustration away spiked suddenly, but he settled for resting his hands on his hips. "And that's ignoring Ororo's texts."

"Texts?" May asked.

"About the new wine bar in town." *That* actually brought a cringe to May's expression, but Bruce shook his head. "I don't find it offensive that she missed the part where I don't drink," he promised. May's face stayed pinched. "But it makes me wonder what you're really doing."

She spent a few seconds examining him silently, her eyes steady and her lips pressed together, before shaking her head. "I'm offering you a ticket to a chamber orchestra concert."

He raised his eyebrows.

She sighed. "And the other ticket might just belong to the mother of Peter's friend Gwen."

Bruce frowned for a half-second before the name registered. "Gwen with the father who died last year?" he asked. May glanced guiltily at the floor, and this time, Bruce allowed the spike of annoyance to win. He dropped his hands to his sides. "Are you all trying to set me up on *dates*?"

May shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "We thought—"

"Did Tony put you up to this?" Bruce demanded without thinking. He'd started to peek out his windows at random points throughout the nights and weekends, convinced he'd see one of the Starks's cars slowly crawling down his street. A text message from Pepper'd ostensibly promised that he was *in the clear from Tony's snooping*, but he didn't trust it; it wouldn't be the first time Tony'd borrowed his wife's phone without permission. But this? "This is a bridge too far," he decided, running his fingers through his hair. "Just because I won't tell him who I'm sleeping with, he arranges for a parade of colleagues I respect to try and hook me up with the nearest available—"

"Wait, wait, you're sleeping with someone?" May interrupted, and Bruce immediately snapped his mouth shut. He'd hardly heard his own words as they exploded out from between his lips, but now, repeated back, they felt like hot brands. He flinched, the tips of his ears burning red, but she refused to break eye contact. "Bruce, if I'd known for a second you had a girlfriend, I never would've suggested we start all this."

"I—" he began, but then paused. The words jumbled in his brain, but when he sorted them out, he realized he was frowning at her. "Tony didn't put you up to this?"

May snorted. "Stark? Please. The only sex he really cares about is his own." Bruce very nearly laughed at that, but she shook her head. "You play your cards pretty close to the vest, you know that? Because we were all convinced you were a 'confirmed bachelor.'"

Bruce allowed the corners of his lips to tip into something close to a smile. "You are probably not the first to suspect that."

"And I probably won't be the last unless you start advertising you've got somebody cute at home." May snatched up her chamber orchestra ticket. "I'm glad I told Gwen I'd pay her for this later. I'd be annoyed if I'd actually bought it from her for nothing."

"You bought the ticket off a college student?" he asked.

"Needs must, Doctor Banner." He finally cracked a grin as she poked him in the chest with the ticket. "You actually like the girl you're sleeping with?"

"Yes," he answered, unthinkingly. He blinked at the sound of his own voice, but May seemed to accept it with a nod. "Though it's not public knowledge, so you could—"

"Mum's the word," she promised, and crossed her heart using the orchestra ticket. "Of course, if Stark knows, you can't hide for too long."

Bruce thought momentarily to all the times he'd stolen a glance out his front curtains in the last week. "I know," he admitted, and managed to hold onto his smile until after May left.

seriously, are you just not picking up your phone today? what is wrong with you, I promised a surprise and you're practically mute!

The red light three blocks from Bruce's house flicked to green, and Tony tossed his phone on the passenger's seat in mild disgust as he pulled through the intersection. Above him, the thick clouds—January-gray in color and heavy with potential *weather*—promised a lousy day, perfect for staying in bed, hiding from friends and family, and generally enjoying a bit of new year privacy.

Except Tony and Bruce always went to a morning meeting on the second Saturday of the month, filling the two-hour time slot that happened to perfectly correspond with when Pepper went to either the hairdresser, the nail place, or her massage spa (whichever she'd scheduled for that particular Saturday). This morning, she planned on having her toenails painted.

And also this morning, because he certainly wasn't getting a pedicure at the same place as his *wife*, Tony planned on whisking Bruce away to a double-feature science fiction festival in lieu of their meeting—cancelled because of potential snow, the wusses. Tony, who was inexplicably on the leader's phone tree even though he'd expressly refused to hand out his number several hundred times (Bruce's fault, then), had received a text about it, along with the suggestion he let Bruce know so Bruce could "plan his day accordingly."

Bruce's plan was now spending his day with his best friend for life.

He didn't know that yet, but it was definitely a thing in his future. Brunch, then science fiction, then maybe dinner over at the house if he didn't wriggle out with his whole "I don't want to interrupt the private times of your marriage" routine. Tony'd promised a thousand times that he'd never, *ever* let Bruce interrupt his truly private times with his wife.

Unless Bruce was into that.

Bruce always rolled his eyes at that one.

He pulled onto Bruce's block and killed the radio so he didn't wake all the neighbors on the sleepy little street. A quick glance at his phone revealed that he still had exactly zero texts from his buddy. Probably shaving before the meeting, Tony thought to himself, or so enraptured in a crossword puzzle that he wasn't thinking about his cell phone in the next room.

He wondered how Bruce, one of the smartest guys he knew, managed to get so half-distracted all the damn time. Maybe, he reasoned, it was a side effect of living on a boring little cookie-cutter block like this one, where every third car was a Prius and where guys in slouchy pajama pants lazily kissed pretty redheads on their front stoop, and—

Wait.

Wait, *what?*

Tony slammed on the brakes, threw the car into park, and immediately twisted around to stare back behind him. Because every god-forsaken house was built almost the exact same way, with the same beige-or-white (pick which!) aluminum siding and stupid green plastic mailboxes, he'd

breezed right past Bruce's address. And, apparently, past Bruce, because no one else in the universe had periodic table pajama pants and fluffy moose slippers from school Secret Santa three years ago.

And no one else, at least on the block, was kissing a woman dressed in jeans and a leather jacket.

Tony killed the engine and unbuckled his seatbelt, just to make sure he could get a full view of the situation. There was no other word for it, no other description befitting of Bruce standing there, bed-headed and still in his pajamas, with his hands up under the woman's jacket as he kissed her. And not sexy, hungry, *fuck you seven ways from Sunday and leave you begging for more* kissing, either; this kissing qualified almost as leisurely, the kind of kissing that promised a lot more once you had a bit more free time.

Tony knew that kissing.

Tony used that kissing a lot when he was about to undertake a major IT project at the school on the same weekend that Pepper wanted to show off her newest pair of sexy, sexy boots.

Or underwear.

Or pumps.

Or—

The point was, Bruce wasn't kissing this girl like he'd kiss a fuck-buddy. No, he kissed her like he meant it, warm and lingering, and Tony wanted to beat his head into the driver's side window.

Because if Bruce was kissing her like that? Yeah, there was no way he was keeping it casual and easy. Not in a million goddamn years.

The two of them broke apart across the street, their mouths separating long enough for them to exchange some snippets of conversation, and Tony reached for the car door handle. He'd promised Pepper he'd stay out of it—to, quote, let Bruce "have his space" and "manage his love life in peace"—but seeing it fairly-close and personal felt a thousand times worse than just conceptualizing it and he needed to stop this train in its tracks. He needed to intervene, to stop Bruce from splintering his own broken heart, and to hopefully accomplish all these things before that redheaded hussy left him crying into his mostly-organic salads.

And then, the redheaded hussy turned around, and Tony forgot how doors worked.

Instead, he gaped helplessly at one Natasha Romanoff.

He blinked to clear his vision, but she stayed the same. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, too, just in case, but nope. Nope, Natasha remained Natasha, in her usual black leather jacket and tight boot-cut jeans, her lips curled into a little smile as she waved at Bruce over her shoulder and walked toward her car. Tony immediately scrunched down as far as he could, suddenly grateful that he'd driven one of the sedans (four-wheel drive and a sedate silver) instead of the sports car. Twice, he peeked up over the back of his seat to find Bruce still standing on his stoop, watching Natasha climb into her car; also twice, he tucked up into the smallest ball known to mankind and silently wished to become invisible.

Natasha was the hussy.

Natasha, who kept halfway to herself, who practically shared genes with Barton despite their looks (and dramatic difference in age, despite what Barton claimed), who twice now'd nearly mauled

Rogers's new boy-toy in front of the entire school (because really, everybody knew they were banging)—

Natasha Romanoff.

And Bruce Banner.

Tony stayed slouched in the driver's seat for a long time after that, even once Natasha'd driven away, Bruce'd walked back inside, and a text'd chimed through on his phone. He tried to remember the stories he'd heard, all of them mostly rumors and all of them suggesting that Natasha was either into girls, a black-hearted widow of some kind, or possibly both. Despite years of Tony's needling, she'd always kept her cards close to her chest; and now, despite probably knowing better, she was trying to fuck the brains right out of his best friend.

No.

No, Tony was not having it.

Tony was so not having it that he reached for his phone and immediately unlocked it, opening the text message window without looking and—

Platonic Science Life Partner: *Todd text messaged me last night to tell me the meeting was cancelled, Tony. So instead of whatever you're planning, why don't you and Pepper come over for dinner? I'll make something Indian, and she won't have to listen to you recap whatever scheme you planned on dragging me into.*

Tony blinked at the message. *you're inviting us over?* he asked.

Yes, Bruce replied seconds later.

voluntarily socializing with myself and my wife without feeling guilty that we might want to be gazing longingly into each other's eyes? cooking some of your ridiculous indian food that you only save for special occasions? without begging?

Yes.

who are you and what did you do with bruce?

Even across the street, Tony swore he could hear Bruce laughing. *Maybe I'm just in one of my rare good moods*, he responded, and Tony's blood ran cold.

Natasha Romanoff was Bruce's friends-with-benefits—and Bruce, for the first time in a dangerously long time, had it bad to the point of blindness.

i'll ask pep about it when she gets home, Tony typed back limply, and then banged his head against the driver's side headrest many, many, *many* times.

Experiencing silence in his classroom was something that rarely happened for Bruce. He loved his students dearly, and was enthralled in the way their brains and personalities grew in the year they spent with him. But every now and then, he just needed some quiet; today was one of those days.

He'd started the morning with a bloody nose (because Sam couldn't keep his fingers out of his nostrils to save his life) and an accident (Darren was too busy listening to an audiobook to notice more pressing needs). Add to that a fire drill, three e-mails from parents who needed to be put on

anti-anxiety meds, and checking in on Wade Wilson's day subbing with pre-schoolers, and one could easily understand why the silence was a welcome gift to Bruce's ears.

Except the silence let his mind drift, and today it kept going back to the conversation he'd had with Tony after dinner on Saturday. His best friend had waited all through the meal and until Pepper was in the bathroom before confessing that he'd spotted Bruce kissing Natasha outside his home that morning. He'd then laid out the warning that he'd talk to Natasha himself if Bruce didn't.

Bruce felt incensed at the ultimatum. He wasn't a child; Tony had only a year on him age-wise. And since Tony was in his first truly stable and healthy (not to mention long-lasting) relationship in his entire life, what room did he have to judge?

He felt the flames of his temper once again slowly burning away at his self-control. This was why he'd spent the last four days avoiding Tony as much as he could. They'd still gone to their traditional Monday night meeting, but Bruce had canceled their usual milkshake man-date on account of a headache, which wasn't a lie. It was attributed to the lack of sleep he'd gotten, and not for fun reasons. His insomnia was due to the fact that maybe, just possibly, Tony's words held the slightest hint of truth, and it was easier to hide from that than address it.

His senses tingled as he moved around his room preparing for the next day, and he picked up on the fact that he was no longer alone. Bruce didn't have to turn around to know who was standing in the doorway to his classroom; he knew that pattern of breathing almost as well as his own. And the level of intensity of the stare boring into his back could only be mustered by Tony.

He fought off a sigh. "My deadline up?" he asked while keeping his head down and laying out worksheets on tables for his students to do in the morning.

Tony walked into the room and shut the door behind him. "Talk to her, or I will."

Bruce tossed the remainder of the papers in hand down onto one of the short tables his students used as a desk with an annoyed huff. "Since when do you get to make those demands?"

"Since my best friend's heart was involved. Sorry for not wanting that to be broken."

Bruce let out a bitter chuckle as he felt his temper swell and overcome him. "And what would you know about broken hearts?"

"Bruce—"

"No, really. What would you know? Please tell me the tales of how you've had your heart broken. Someone get the new Audi sports car before you did? Supermodel stand you up for dinner one time?"

Tony raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "I'm just saying that I know what it's like to lose things."

Bruce went still at the statement and his vision turned red. He took a shaky breath before asking in a voice quieted by the intensity of his rage, "Are you seriously comparing the end of my marriage to the end of your career at your father's company?"

"All I meant was—"

"I buried my wife!" Bruce roared. "You didn't spend years loving your company. There was no flesh for you to spend hours memorizing every inch of. No vows you made swearing yourself to it for your whole life. No hand to hold as you watched it struggle to breathe after its body was broken

from a car accident. And fuck you for thinking that there was." He hadn't realized that his anger demanded movement and that he'd crossed the space of the classroom until he spat the last sentence directly into Tony's face.

His so-called friend at least had the grace to remain silent for moment. Tony swallowed and licked his lips before softly replying, "I should't have made—"

"There's a lot of things you shouldn't have done, Tony," Bruce said as he began to pace. "Stalking me, demanding ultimatums about my relationships, and doing it all in the name of being my best friend." He paused to turn and stare at the other man. "Do you know what best friends do in situations like this? Situations where someone is willing to maybe try and risk a bit of their heart again? They encourage it. They say that they're proud of the progress being made."

"Buddy, all I'm trying to do—" Tony attempted to explain.

"I finally get the opportunity to spend time with someone—even if it's not that much or on a regular basis—and you'd rather kick me back down into loneliness? Why? You worried if I spend time with her I won't be at your beck and call?"

"Bruce—"

"Get out." He half-heartedly waved at the door, his eyes turning their focus to his battered loafers. "Just get out and leave me alone."

It was custom on the first Thursday of the month to have a ladies night. Any woman who didn't have kids to run to team practices, classes to take, or any other obligation was welcome. There was a different organizer for the event each month, the lone sign pointing to how the origin of the outings was a book club.

This month they met a week late because of the chaos of getting back into the swing of things after winter break, and Jessica Drew was the one put in charge. The second grade team lead decided on bowling because it was an excuse to "hurl heavy objects at things and drink cheap beer."

Pepper didn't feel the need to ask how the online dating world was from the muttered identities of men—a mixture of screen names and actual first names—as Jess chucked her red and yellow ball down the lane. It sounded like dating wasn't the teacher's forte at the moment, which was not something the guidance counselor was going to bring up. Jean, on the other hand... Carol stepped in and rerouted the conversation so the group wouldn't have to listen to Jess's rants for the next two hours.

Next time Pepper went up to the bar, she was buying Carol Danvers the beer of her choice.

The only downside of their chat's redirection was the new topic of finding Bruce a girlfriend. May had come to Pepper a few weeks ago trying to pry out details of Bruce's tastes when it came to potential dates, but Pepper refused to play along. She politely but firmly told the music teacher that she wasn't going to play a part in the matchmaking scheme on account of Bruce being her husband's best friend.

But the other part of it was she had no idea what Bruce liked. Knowing what she knew now—because her husband couldn't keep a secret to save his firm and well-shaped ass—Pepper would have never guessed the kindergarten teacher's proclivities ran in the petite, closed-off, redheaded direction. Not that Pepper didn't understand why Bruce wouldn't have jumped at the opportunity. As Tony had proclaimed when he'd finally let his secret slip after keeping it in for a whole twenty-

two hours, "His dick has to be as broken as my brain is."

But then Tony had gone on to tell her about how he'd told Bruce that he needed to talk to Natasha about the nature of their relationship. While Pepper loved her husband's concern for his friend, she internally cringed. Tony possessed as much tact as he did pairs of cheap underwear—none at all.

He'd come home late a couple of nights ago only to close himself off in the garage to work on one of his endless projects. She'd let him be for an hour before invading his space and hovering nearby until he spilled his guts about how Bruce'd exploded at him.

"You still going to talk to Natasha?" Pepper had asked.

"Why? So he can hate me more?"

Pepper hadn't known how to respond to that, so she'd just walked over and enveloped him in a hug.

She was pulled back into the conversation around her when May admitted that Bruce had told her he was seeing someone. "Technically he said 'sleeping with' someone, but he didn't correct me when I used the word girlfriend."

Pepper heard a low whistle from Monica and a number of other surprised outbursts, but she surreptitiously kept her eyes on Natasha. The other redhead made no move to announce she was the woman in question (not surprising); in fact, she didn't have any reaction at all. She let the women batter around names of possible girlfriends for a moment before she gracefully stood and made her way to the bar. Pepper let her have a head start before she followed in that direction.

"I'm sorry my husband can be an ass," Pepper apologized as she slid onto the stool neighboring Natasha's.

Her friend looked at her with a slightly creased brow. "I'm not going to dispute that fact, but I don't know what exactly you're talking about."

"The fight Bruce and Tony had the other day." Pepper's attempt to clarify only caused Natasha's eyebrows to draw closer together. "About you."

Those two words caused Natasha's eyes to widen ever so slightly, but the rest of her remained, still ignoring the drink the bartender sat down in front of her. "What about me?"

"Didn't Bruce tell you? Tony saw you guys kissing on Bruce's porch last Saturday morning."

"Oh," Natasha replied softly, her mouth settling into a surprised circle for the briefest of moments before her face regained its neutrality. "No, he didn't tell me about that."

Pepper blinked in surprise. "Well, Tony found out and—"

"They had a fight?"

"Apparently. I don't—"

"About me? More specifically, about Bruce being with me?"

Pepper sighed as she tried to salvage the conversation. "That's not Tony's concern. I'm sure deep down he's happy for the both of you; it's just that he treats Bruce like this extremely fragile thing and freaks out at the slightest chance of him getting hurt."

Natasha nodded as her lips pursed together. She spun on her stool to fully face the bar and took a

sip of whatever vodka concoction the bartender made her. "I wouldn't hurt him," she admitted quietly.

"I know that. I do. And I'm sure Tony does as well, but he's scared about Bruce developing feelings beyond wham, bam, thank you ma'am." She paused as she sipped her beer. "I realize that I'm hardly one to take relationship advice from seeing as how I vowed to stay with Tony Stark until I die and all, but if Bruce isn't the only one developing feelings—"

"It's just sex." Natasha turned her attention back to Pepper and raised her chin slightly in a silent challenge for her to question the statement.

Pepper knew that look; Tony aimed it at her at least three times a month. It was the one that screamed denial of the words spoken. She swallowed another sigh and nodded. "Hopefully, it's at least good sex. Great, even." Her poor attempt at a joke did nothing to change Natasha's expression. "Okay, well, don't get mad at Tony. Trust me—I can do more damage to him than you ever could. Just let me know how long he needs to sleep on the couch if need be."

The two sipped their drinks in silence for a couple more minutes before Natasha slid off her stool. "They're probably wondering where we are."

"I'll be there in a second. Need to get Carol a drink." Pepper debated on saying anything else and caved while Natasha was still in earshot. "You know, the guys are busy on Monday nights. If you want to do something, or talk, or whatever. Unlike my husband, I can keep a secret."

Natasha turned to look over her shoulder and stare at her for a handful of seconds before she continued on to rejoin their friends.

Pepper didn't bother to hide her sigh this time as she pulled her phone out of her back pocket. It took her a moment to find Tony in her list of contacts since he had a habit of hacking her phone to give himself a new identity every few days. For the moment he was listed under Sugar Daddy. She swiped open their latest text conversation to message *You're an ass.*

probably. but can you give me specifics so I know how badly I need to apologize when you get home?

Pretty sure you just made me piss off Natasha.

DEFCON 4 it is.

It was a Saturday, seven days after Bruce woke up to Natasha still in his bed. A fact he'd shown his appreciation for in a number of ways, including lazy necking on his front stoop. If people even called it that anymore.

It was hard for him to believe that it was merely a week ago. It felt so much longer after the emotions that had wrung him dry since then.

He stood in his entryway, frozen for a good ten minutes and debating with himself the merits of what he was about to do. He knew deep down that Tony was right; there was no way Bruce could really pull off a no-strings-attached kind of relationship. He wasn't cut out for it, and this was one of the few times in his life where he didn't pride himself on that fact. Taking a deep, fortifying breath he walked out his front door and got in his hybrid.

The roads to Natasha's condo were familiar to him. They had been before Jessica Cage's wedding when this whole thing had started. And that was the thing that Bruce had to keep reminding

himself. He and Natasha had been friends for five and a half years now. She was one of the few people around who could understand his level of loss in life because she'd survived it herself—Bruce couldn't risk ruining their friendship. And he hoped that he hadn't done that already.

And it wasn't just the ability to share a knowing look on bad days that he would miss if things were irreparably damaged; it would be the quiet, snarky comments shot back and forth during group outings or the mutual eye rolls when Tony was being too much of himself. He would deeply miss his friend.

Bruce would also miss what little of a something they'd built together, even if it was almost entirely action and no talk of relationships—or anything else, really. Especially in the last couple of months, it felt, to him anyway, like it had the potential to become something more than just not missing sex together. But he was wrong, and he needed for things to stop before his foolish choices tore his life up any further.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as he stalked up the narrow sidewalk to her section of the row of conjoined townhomes. He sighed and hoped yet again that this was the actual right thing to do, and that whatever happened next would be something that wouldn't ruin things. It was a count of seven between him ringing her doorbell and Natasha appearing before him. She wore her usual Saturday-at-home fare: an attempt to pull her bobbed curls into a ponytail, oversized t-shirt, pair of sweatpants, and green and purple striped fuzzy socks doubling as slippers.

He must've had it written on his face, some expression to let her know about the conversation they were about to have, because when she opened the door, he watched her shut down. The small sparkle he'd learned to look for in her blue eyes vanished as her face went slack.

Bruce cleared his throat before quietly asking, "Can I come in?" Natasha stared him down for a moment before silently stepping to the side and granting him entrance.

He wished she would've said no, would've slammed the door in his face—anything, really. But she hadn't, and now he had to walk into her home with her looking adorably comfy. Life sucked sometimes.

Natasha led him into the kitchen; probably best to sit on hard, uncomfortable furniture than the couch where they, well. Bruce was surprised at the number of memories they'd built in her home since Thanksgiving. Not all of them were sexual; the couch was the place where they would quietly read while their shoulders rested against each other or with her head pillowed in his lap. He tried to push the feeling of her hair between his fingers from his mind.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"I'm good, thanks." He unbuttoned his coat, but didn't bother taking it off. This needed to be like ripping off a Band-Aid; he needed to act quickly. "I needed to tell you something, and I wanted to do it in person." He paused to run his fingers through his hair and then immediately regretted the action, knowing it would add to its perpetual fluffiness. "We—I mean, I can't do this anymore."

Natasha stayed quiet for a moment, her bright blue eyes taking in every hitch in his movement. "Okay," she answered.

"It's not a slight against you. If anything—"

"It was just sex, Bruce. It's okay."

He swallowed his words as memories burned into his brain flashed in front of him: Natasha

boneless in his bed, the sound of her gasping his name, the feeling of her fingers tugging on his hair.

Just sex, he reminded himself.

"Right," he replied. "Look, the last thing I want is for you to feel uncomfortable around me."

"I'm not going to transfer schools just because you're ending this. We had some fun, and now it's over." She shrugged. "That's how these things work."

He bit his tongue to keep himself from laying too many things—more things than he already had—bare. "Well," he said as he stood, "I guess I'll be on my way, then." She followed him to the door, and he turned to face her. "It feels weird saying 'thank you,' but thanks. The last six weeks have been..." He let his words trail off and reminded himself once again to just get out of her house and let things lie. "I'll see you Monday," he told her as he made his exit. He hoped he imagined the speed at which she shut the door behind him was because of the bitterly cold January wind and not anything he'd done.

"We're going to be late for the movie," Steve murmured in a complaint that definitely didn't qualify as real complaining.

"In a minute," Bucky replied, and pushed him back against the wall before kissing him again.

In Bucky's defense, he hadn't planned on pinning his sexy, wind-rumpled blond Adonis of a boyfriend against the wall behind his door and kissing him until they both ran out of breath. No, he'd planned on taking Steve to the movie and then to dinner, a sort of *glad you are healthy and also that break is over* celebration.

But then, the first week back to school had exploded in their faces. Bucky spent a day with horrendous food poisoning (leading to some funny e-mail strings with Steve that mostly involved promises to nurse him back to health next time), Steve lost an evening to a school board meeting concerning arts funding, and Bucky's monthly Accelerated Reader meeting ran an hour long thanks to some sneaky cheating by a group of fourth graders. (Barton'd eventually suggested feeding them to wild wolves. The entire group agreed.) They'd even considered begging off happy hour, but Stark'd refused to take no for an answer.

"You can get your rocks off any time," he'd informed them, one arm slung around Bucky's shoulder while the other hung somewhere around Steve's mid-back. "You can only drink once a week."

"I'm not sure that's true," Steve'd pointed out.

"And besides," Bucky'd tagged on, "not all of us have access to the supply closet of sex."

Steve'd paused right there on the front sidewalk, his face a mask of deep thought. Tony'd actually announced, "Congrats, Barnes, you broke your boy-toy," he'd looked so concerned and considerate.

At least, until Steve'd said, "There is that tiny closet that houses the kiln," and Tony's words devolved into incoherent noises about how *wrong* it was for the one-and-only Mister Rogers to crack a sex joke.

In short, then, they'd spent a week without really seeing each other.

And then, Steve'd walked in, wind-ruffled and pink-cheeked, and Bucky'd stopped searching for

his belt to back the guy up against the wall and kiss him.

He pulled away for breath for the second time only to watch Steve chase his mouth. He allowed a single soft bite to his lower lip before he really ducked out of the way. "Thought you wanted to see the movie," he commented, his breath and voice both rougher than he intended.

"You started it," Steve defended.

"So I can't want a couple minutes to say hi to my guy?"

"Your guy?" Steve repeated, and Bucky felt a funny warmth spread out from the middle of his stomach. Despite sitting knee-to-knee at Xavier's the night before and exchanging dozens of text messages (and a handful of calls) over break and the week after, it still felt new and heady to describe the relationship in those terms. He'd wanted to ask Natasha about it and find out whether she'd felt overwhelmed during her early days with Alex, but she'd seemed weirdly out of sorts lately.

Bucky'd grown up with four sisters. He knew what that all meant.

"Boyfriend gets old," Bucky finally answered, and was blessed with one of Steve's sparkling little smiles. "Gotta spice it up, keep you interested." When the smile grew to a full-on grin, Bucky nudged Steve's hip with his own. With their bodies pressed together, it was impossible not to feel the full effect of their impromptu make-out session—or to know from Steve's sharp intake of breath that he'd felt the same. Bucky considered rutting up against him like a teenage boy, but he decided to show some restraint.

His mouth found Steve's again, but briefly. Because, again, *restraint*. "Movie, dinner, necking like we're sixteen and our moms still wash our shorts?" he suggested.

"Like you'll make it through the movie," Steve returned, and pinned Bucky against the door to kiss him again, so long and hard that Bucky needed to thread his arms around Steve's neck just to feel grounded.

The theater was crowded, but Bucky managed to behave, keeping his hands almost to himself even while Steve steered him around with a palm on his back or pressed to his hip—even if it made it hard to order a soda, that way. They found seats in the back, Steve grinning the whole time.

"The view's better up here," Bucky defended, dropping into one of the seats.

"I'm sure you've said that to a number of guys," Steve replied innocently.

Just for that, Bucky stole his soda. "You make it sound like I'm in a hurry to take advantage of you."

Steve quirked an eyebrow. "Aren't you?"

He packed so much innocence into the question that Bucky couldn't help the little chuckle that snuck out. Steve crowded in close to him, despite the armrest, and looked about ready to do most the kissing himself when Bucky's phone chimed. He grumbled about putting it on silent until he saw the caller ID.

Nat: *I know you're out being appropriately disgusting with your boyfriend. I just want you to know I'll be late to the gym tomorrow.*

"Everything okay?" Steve asked, glancing discreetly over at the phone. Bucky shrugged and tipped

the display in his direction while he typed back *we'd put you in a diabetic coma, but okay*. "You have a gym date?"

"I keep her motivated."

"I've seen you eat, so I think it might be the other way around." Bucky elbowed him in the side, and Steve immediately retaliated by sliding an arm under Bucky's so he could offer his hand. Diabetic coma wasn't actually far off, but that didn't keep him from twining their fingers before he stowed his phone back in his coat. "She okay?"

"I don't know," Bucky admitted. "She's been weird lately. Like somebody muted her. The holidays can be hard for her."

"She lost someone?"

Bucky nodded. "Her mom. And Alex, to an extent, but that's a whole different story." He waved a hand. "She probably just has cramps."

Steve screwed his face up into a frown. "I don't think women appreciate it when you blame things on their cycles."

Bucky tipped a head in his direction. "No offense, but I've known Natasha since we were eighteen. You could set a watch by her 'cycle.' It's not assumption as much as it's science."

Steve laughed. "I missed out by not having sisters, didn't I?"

"That's not the right way to describe it at all," Bucky retorted, and hearing Steve's laugh after a couple weeks apart felt like a belated Christmas gift.

They made it most of the way through the movie without incident, unless quickly-stolen kisses during a badly-choreographed fight scene counted. The teenagers two rows ahead were a lot worse. Bucky wished he could use hormones as an excuse to be handsy and greedy.

He considered mentioning that exact thing on their walk to the car, too, when Steve cast his eyes over in Bucky's direction. With his hands in his pockets and his chin lowered, he looked almost shy. Bucky blinked at him. "What?"

"I don't want to cross any lines," Steve said, "but—"

"But?" Bucky prompted as he trailed off.

"How would you feel about getting take-out somewhere and going back to one of our places? To, you know, spend some quality time together."

Bucky bit down on the edges of his grin, afraid that if it overtook his entire face, Steve'd never let him live it down. "Who's taking advantage now?" he asked while his heart nearly took flight right out of his chest.

"I guess we'll find out," Steve replied, a spark of something new and exciting flashing across his eyes.

In the end, after they'd ditched the food to press one another to the couch cushion and fumbled with stupid buttons that they really should've popped open two or three days ago, Bucky decided they were pretty evenly matched.

How Things Become Broken

Chapter Summary

This is another flashback chapter; this round features Natasha and Bruce.

Bruce felt his breath catch when he saw the Teach for America logo emblazoned on an envelope. The image peeked out of the pile of other postal detritus in the mailbox. He resisted the urge to open it there on the curb and was quite proud of himself for making it all the way back inside his and Betty's new, cozy, gorgeous home without breaking the seal.

Teaching wasn't ever something he imagined doing, at least not full-time. Sure, he'd be willing to instruct a lecture or two a semester if it meant a university would pay him to do research, but educating students wasn't the real purpose of Bruce's foray into academia. He'd earned a few published articles in his time gathering degrees—not necessarily a stellar portfolio to offer, but still better than some other brand new PhDs. He'd wanted to start working on a post-doctoral degree, but Betty had already chosen to complete the doctoral program at Culver, and there wasn't any place on staff for Bruce; thus, he'd be teaching full-time. For now, anyway.

Bruce set the other envelopes down on the kitchen table and opened the package of information with the Teach for America logo on the front. He sent up a silent prayer to whoever was listening that the school he'd been assigned to would be at least within an hour of the university where Betty would be doing her doctoral work. He'd already given up opportunities at several research posts to be with his wife; he didn't want his hastily constructed Plan B to screw him over geographically, too.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the address of the school was listed in Willowdale—the same sleepy city where Culver was located. A grin broke out on Bruce's face until his eyes fell on the class assignment. What was supposed to say *High School Physics* instead read *Kindergarten*. "Huh," was all that would fall out of his mouth.

Betty came up behind him to drape an arm around his waist; she rested her chin on his shoulder so she could read the letter. Bruce knew when she got to the part about his class assignment because she snorted in his ear.

"Thanks," he said, but that only caused her barely-contained laughter to dissolve into near-guffaws. "This is really supportive of you. Thank you very much."

"I'm sorry," she apologized before clamping a hand over her mouth. She controlled her laughter before offering a more sincere apology.

"Five-year-olds," Bruce muttered. "I can do that for a couple years, right?" he asked as he turned and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Betty nodded before resting her forehead against his. "Two years. We'll pay off some student loans, I'll finish my PhD, and then we'll find a place to do research together again."

He smiled at the memory of first meeting the woman who would be his wife in a lab he taught. He had made sure to wait an appropriate whole semester before asking her out. Bruce was grateful for

the time needed to keep things professional; he never thought a woman as beautiful and smart as Betty would ever give him the time of day.

But she had. They'd been together for three years now, married for eight months, and Bruce had never been happier in his life. Betty made him feel whole—a feeling he never thought he'd find when he was growing up.

"How am I going to do this?" he asked quietly.

Betty shrugged. "Just like you've handled any other experiment in your life—you'll come up with a materials list, think out a procedure, study how things are progressing, and readjust protocols if need be."

He smiled as he dipped his head to kiss along her jaw. "It's so hot when you talk science." Her laughter poured into him like sunshine, and the soft moan that escaped her as he lightly added teeth to the equation never failed to make his stomach plummet.

Together they spent the summer preparing each other for their upcoming school years. Betty helped him decorate his classroom, and Bruce helped her prepare to teach her undergraduate biology classes and setup her research lab. When classes began, Betty would swing by his school every now and then to bring him lunch. She always stood in the back corner of the room and watched him with those ever-observant eyes. He caught a look of wistfulness on her face once, but she had to get back to the lab before he could press her for details.

He asked her about it later that night in the safety of their dark bedroom. She shrugged as her initial answer. "I was just thinking about what ours would be like."

"Our what?"

"Kindergartner." Bruce stilled at the answer. They'd had the family talk numerous times, but it was always clinical; Betty had her timeline, which was fine, but it never delved into hypotheticals of hair color, gender, or behavior. "I mean, we're not having kids—"

"For six years," he finished, knowing the schedule.

"Right, but... it just made me curious." She rolled up on an elbow to brush curls away from his forehead. "You're good with them."

It was his turn to shrug. "I'm okay."

Betty shook her head at him. "You're more than okay. Those kids adore you; I can easily understand why," she countered before leaning to down to place a kiss between his eyebrows.

He pulled her closer so that she ended up half-sprawled on top of him. Bruce was surprised how natural teaching his young students felt. He'd caught himself a number of times telling Betty story after story about their inquisitiveness, their humor, and their refreshing outlook on everything. Deep down, there was a voice that whispered at him that he could make this his life.

"You could do this, you know," she said quietly into his neck. "You're good for them. I know they've been good for you."

"Pass the popcorn," James whined with his hand outstretched.

Natasha pushed the bowl further away from him on the futon. "Get your own."

"That is my own. Just like this is my futon and my dorm room. Just because you're banging my roommate doesn't mean you get to eat my food."

"You offered."

"I offered *some*, not the whole damn bowl. Now, c'mon and hand it over. I had to run five miles before your ass was even out of bed this morning."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "I had to do my fair share of running at practice today."

Bucky gave her a look of disbelief. "Are you seriously comparing gymnastics to the ROTC?"

"Are you?" she challenged with raised eyebrow.

She heard him mutter something about "batshit crazy Russians" as she shoved another handful of his popcorn into her mouth.

This was their weekly hangout time. Granted, they saw each other a lot; the two had become as thick as thieves since orientation. They'd even tried dating, but then Natasha realized the expression James gave her boobs was admiration and not lust. That and the lack of action spelled things out clearly enough. A couple months into their freshmen year, James unsurprisingly admitted he was gay over vodka and pizza, and she told him she thought his roommate was pretty hot. James agreed.

Natasha had started dating Alex a few weeks later, and there was plenty of action in that relationship. Her boyfriend—the title still felt weird even after four months of being together—had a night class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. While Natasha had to travel with the gymnastics team for meets, she could usually bank on being on campus every Thursday; thus, she and James started their weekly tradition of watching *Project Runway* and snarking about the contestants.

"I'm not that gay," Bucky argued when he first gave in to the idea. "I just have four sisters and this makes me feel less homesick."

"Man up," Natasha'd countered while bumping her shoulder against his. The contact led to one of their many shoving matches.

They both rejoiced at the noisy drama queen being sent home that week. James rose from the couch with a sigh and stretched his long limbs. "Almost time for Alex to be back from class," he announced as he began to lace up his tennis shoes. "Which means I'm going to go for a nice walk around campus while you two get busy trying to single-handedly repopulate the world with gingers."

She shot him a dirty look. "Just for that, I'm sleeping over. And I might need to have another round in the sack in the middle of the night."

James groaned. "Can I just go sleep in your bed then?"

She shook her head. "Only athletes allowed in my dorm. Why do you think I'm over here all the time?"

"Because of my wonderful charm and personality," James countered. "And to steal my food."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "I'll buy you more popcorn."

"You said that last week."

"And I did buy you more." He stared her down until she admitted, "And then I kept it in my room and ate all of it."

"Exactly."

"I grew up in the Soviet Union; we didn't have popcorn."

"Bullshit."

Natasha shrugged. "Pretty sure I could fool most people with that line."

The both turned as the door to the room opened. Alex gave them both a nod as he shucked his backpack and winter coat. James threw a wink her way before tapping his wrist to let her know they had thirty minutes to themselves before quietly making his exit.

Alex turned and gave her a wide smile. "Hey, beautiful," he greeted before scooping her up from the futon and depositing her on the bottom bunk. She squirmed against his hold, and even though she had plenty of muscle on her small frame, it never did any good.

He laughed as he covered her body with his, and she gave in to the contact with a hiss as he kissed his way down her neck. His big hands quickly found the hem of her t-shirt and began to roam their way up underneath, causing her to roll her eyes before his thumb grazed just the right spot and she had to swallow a moan. "Not messing around tonight," she commented, "are you?"

"Between our training exercises and your meets," he answered in between kisses, "I haven't seen you in a week. That's six-and-a-half days too many."

"Please, you just want sex."

"That too," he chuckled as he lifted his head. His bright blue eyes bore into her with a level of intensity she'd never encountered. That wasn't entirely true; she'd seen it from coaches before, but with Alex there was a softness to it. "You know how beautiful you are, right?" he asked quietly.

Natasha shook her head. "I'm already in bed with you; you don't have to butter me up with words."

"I'm serious," he said as he readjusted himself to prop himself up over her while balanced on his elbows. "I don't have the words to accurately describe how gorgeous you are."

She looked away. It wasn't the first time he said things like this, and Natasha knew it wouldn't be the last. She just wasn't used to hearing compliments, at least not ones that didn't center around her ability to tumble and vault. His words caused her heart to race; she could feel its hard and crusty exterior slowly being picked away by the sweetness behind his praises. It made her uncomfortable, and she tried to push down the sensations.

Natasha hooked her ankles around his waist and pulled him down flat on top of her. "We're done talking for a while."

Bruce woke up to the same thing he'd woken up to for the last six weeks: silence.

He lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, the stillness of his house all around him. He could no longer remember the last time he set an alarm, never mind the last time he'd slept through the night. The therapist he'd visited during the third week after the accident had offered sleeping pills, but Bruce'd refused.

He'd claimed, talking to his doctor, that he really didn't like how he felt on that kind of medication.

In truth, he no longer trusted himself.

He rolled out of bed sometime before six a.m. and wandered into the bathroom, turning on the shower as hot as it'd run without scalding him. The mess on the vanity stared up at him: toothpaste, comb, soap, his watch, a pair of earrings, a tube of lipstick. Like every day since the accident, Bruce considered putting a few things away.

Like every day since the accident, he stepped into the shower, instead.

As the hot water pounded against his skin, turning him lobster-red in record time, he tried to cordon off certain corners of his mind. Lately, life consisted almost entirely of sorting through and shutting off unpleasant stimuli. He'd stopped returning the calls from the attorney prosecuting the vehicular homicide case and cancelled three appointments with his therapist; he'd sent an e-mail to the head of Betty's department at Culver about boxing up her office and refused to so much as glance at the life insurance check. He dulled the painful pricks of his existence until they felt almost like the too-hot water of the shower, present but somehow still bearable.

And then, he stayed in the shower until it turned to ice.

He dressed in his usual wardrobe once he finished drying and stepped into the kitchen, switching on the coffee pot and reaching for the newspaper on the counter. Except the counter, as it had for the last six weeks, stood empty. He stared at the blank space for a moment before toeing on his slippers and stepping on the stoop to pick up the familiar plastic bag.

Usually by now, the coffee'd be made and the newspaper waiting.

Usually, water for the second shower of the morning would be thundering through the pipes of their ancient, beautiful house.

Usually, Betty'd be teasing him about leaving his wedding ring on the sink after he finished shaving.

He turned his ring around on his finger.

Usually ended six weeks ago.

Once the coffee finished brewing, Bruce poured himself a mug and settled down to peruse the morning news. The headlines were filled with the usual promises of misery, violence, and death, so he read everything else he could find: sports, weather, editorials, advice columns. After finishing the movie reviews, he started the crossword puzzle; as soon as he worked through both sets of clues once, he unthinkingly slid it across the table to where he knew Betty would look for it after her shower.

When reality crashed back into him, he balled the puzzle up and threw it at the garbage can as hard as he could.

He slipped into work through the back doors by the kindergarten rooms, the last licks of the spring chill cut straight through to his skin; after dropping his bag and coat over the back of his chair, went to work preparing his room. His principal'd offered him as much time as he needed, but Bruce'd refused more than a few weeks of quiet mourning. The silence at home suffocated him, crushing his throat until his lungs burned. He couldn't survive day after endless day without some sort of activity.

The energy he'd always saved for Betty—the smiles, the jokes, the soothing words after she'd suffered a frustrating day at work—went to his students and absolutely no one else. And, as an added bonus, five-year-olds rarely stopped to ask why he looked distant, lost, or sad.

A few minutes before lunch on this particular day, he looked up from where he was helping a boy with delayed motor skills trace over the letters of a few basic vocabulary words to find a little girl named Nina crying in the story corner. The last time he'd checked on Nina, she'd been working on the last part of the assignment (illustrating the vocabulary words with messy crayon cats, dogs, fish, and other creatures); now, she sniffled into a beanbag chair. Bruce quickly encouraged the boy to try a few words on his own and made a beeline across the classroom to Nina.

When she saw him, though, she immediately sat up and wiped her face with her hands. "Sorry, Mister Banner," she apologized. The students all struggled to call him *doctor* due to his lack of stethoscope and lab coat. He really didn't mind. "Mama said I'm not supposed to."

"You can always cry here, if you need to," Bruce told her, reaching for a box of tissues. She stopped wiping her nose on her sleeve to take a handful. He tried to ignore how hard the words hit him. "And everybody needs to, sometimes."

Nina nodded jerkily but then picked at her tissues. "Mama said we can't be sad," she murmured, her face tipped toward the floor. "She said Grandma went to see Jesus, and you can't be sad when somebody goes to see Jesus."

For a split second, Bruce felt all the air rush out of his lungs. He tried to take the comment for what it was—a mother comforting her daughter—but his stomach swiftly transformed into lead. "If you need to be sad somewhere," he said numbly, "you can always be sad here, and strong at home."

He thought Nina nodded, but he couldn't be sure.

The last few minutes before lunch faded into a disjointed blur. Every action and reaction felt muddled, like wading through molasses, and he fought his way through clean-up time and organizing the kids into their lunch lines. As soon as the bell rang and his room was empty, though, he found himself walking out the back doors and straight out into the grass behind the school. The dark rectangle of dirt where the fifth-grade science classes planted spring flowers every year stretched in front of him, freshly-tilled but otherwise empty.

He tried not to turn the garden into a metaphor for his heart.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said to no one, standing there in his wrinkled shirt and slacks. His voice echoed on the spring breeze. "I don't know what happens next. You realize this, right? I came all this way, I— Every time I turn around, something reminds me of you, I don't know how —"

He felt his breath shake as it slipped through his lips, so he pursed them into a tight line. He scrubbed his hands over his two-day old stubble and ignored how much his jaw ached from holding it too tightly. He held everything too tightly, these days: his shoulders, his posture, his expression, his heart. Six weeks felt like a heartbeat and a lifetime, all at once.

And still sometimes, in the dead of night, he woke up from a nightmare of the hospital, and of holding Betty's limp, bandaged hand.

When Bruce opened his eyes—eyes he couldn't remember closing—he found himself staring again at the muddy patch of freshly-tilled earth and the green grass trimming it.

"I can't stay here," he said, more to himself than anyone else. "I can't wake up every morning to the place I last heard your voice. I can't do it anymore."

Three days into the month of June, his kindergarteners—the bright, shining stars he'd told Betty about, all full of proud smiles and childish excitement—graduated into the first grade.

And four days into June, Bruce Banner drove away without looking back.

The cold January air crystallized in her lungs as she turned the corner for the last half-mile of their run, her legs burning. The last half-mile always felt like the longest, up the tallest hill on her alma mater's campus to the old wooden bell tower. The tower'd been closed for years, but remained a source of legend; if you kissed under it, you were guaranteed a lifetime of happiness—or so the story went.

Natasha Romanoff'd stopped believing in fairy tales like magical bell towers a long time ago.

She tried to focus on other things as the climb turned steeper, chanting her shopping list in her head as she huffed and puffed her way up the path, but it didn't help. Her knees complained, her lungs felt like ice, and still she climbed into the hazy gray of the winter morning. Worse, the sun refused to peek out from between the thick cloud cover. The day felt oppressive, its walls slowly closing in on her.

Yeah, she thought to herself, shaking her head, and none of that had to do with Alex being redeployed next week.

The dark blotch of the bell tower grew in her vision.

She pulled in a breath and pushed herself harder, running as fast as her muscles would allow. She'd trained for years and played dozens of sports—gymnastics, sure, but after high school she'd supplemented it with things like track, cross-country, and even intramural soccer. Pushing past her breaking point was nothing new, and if she wanted to win the bet—

"Hey, slowpoke, what's keeping you?" a voice shouted into the quiet of the morning, and Natasha groaned inwardly as she crested the hill.

At the base of the bell tower, balanced perfectly on the reinforced rim of the stone foundation, was Alex, his shock of red hair bright in the shadow. His gray Air Force sweatshirt clung to his shoulders and chest, damp with sweat; his matted hair hung onto his forehead. He reclined back against the tower itself, outwardly relaxed but still lightly panting. Natasha knew from how he held himself that he'd beat her by two minutes at the absolute most.

She only stopped running when she hit the paved area around the bell tower. Over the years, so many couples'd ventured up the hill for good luck in love that the university'd put in paving stones and a plaque, turning it almost into a little date destination. Natasha hated the pinkish stone and the flowery language on the plaque, but she liked the privacy it offered on days like today, when the students were all gone for break and silence washed over the whole hill.

"You cheat," she informed him once she regained her breath.

Alex laughed. "How?"

"You're in the Air Force. You train every day. You're lucky I can keep up at all."

"You think that was 'keeping up?'" She sent him a sharp look, and he grinned as he jumped off the

stone foundation. "I beat you by a good five minutes."

She dragged the bottom of her hoodie up to dry her face, but not before rolling her eyes. "I know what you look like when you're still panting, Alex."

"Maybe I was faking it for your benefit."

"I know what that looks like, too."

He froze for a second, his blue eyes sweeping over her face, and finally cracked up laughing a second time. She smiled, genuine warmth filling her stomach, and stretched her arms high over her head. She knew the exertion and the cold together was going to make her sore, but pleasantly so, and Alex's grin helped chase some of that away.

What didn't help, on the other hand, was him sweeping forward, grabbing her around the waist and hoisting her up into his grip. "Alex!" she complained, swatting at him. Heat flooded her cheeks, and she hated him for that. She was twenty-three, not some brainless school girl with a stupid crush. She'd been through more than most women twice her age. She didn't need her heart to swell helplessly every time he spun her around.

But he refused to let go, as always. "If you don't kiss me under the bell tower," he goaded, the same way he'd goaded on every one of their runs since freshman year, "our life'll end up crappy."

"If you don't put me down," Natasha warned, "*your* life will end. Today."

He snorted a laugh in her ear and, as always, set her down on the pavement. But unlike every other time, he refused to let go; his big hands spread on her hips, pinning her in place. "Come on."

"'Come on' what?"

"This whole thing," he said, jerking his head toward the bell tower. "You always say it's a ton of horseshit—"

"Because it *is*," Natasha noted.

"—but I have to think there's some tiny part of you that believes in happy-ever-afters." She rolled her eyes at him and looked away, but he caught her chin in his hand. She'd never enjoyed feeling petite until she met Alex, mostly because she'd always equated feeling her size with feeling *small*. Alex's height and breadth, never mind his big hands and strong arms, comforted her without shrinking her.

She met his eyes carefully.

"You're not made of brick and stone," he said quietly, his thumb sweeping across her jawline. "It's okay open up more than just the cracks."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "Did you just quote *The Pretenders* at me?"

"If there's blood in your veins and you cry when in pain," he replied with a grin, and Natasha smacked him in the arm. When she tried to step away, though, Alex held her by her hip. "Are you really going to let me go off to deployment without kissing me under the legendary campus bell tower? The one where half of our friends got engaged before graduation?"

"Do you really think me kissing you is going to make you a *remotely* decent pilot?" she shot back. She meant it as a joke, another in their long line of quick jabs, but she caught the hurt that flashed

across his face. The closer the calendar crept toward deployment, the more often he flinched at her jokes. She wondered briefly if she should abandon years of self-preservation and tell him how much she'd miss him—and worry about him.

Instead, she said, "Bell tower kisses are for fairytales."

"And love was for children," he returned, "until you met me."

Natasha's jaw twitched, ready to blurt out a denial, but she knew from the way Alex stared her down that he'd never believe whatever story she created out of whole cloth. Because, of course, he was right: she'd believed love was for children, a thing of bedtime stories, until Alex's breezed into her life.

She reached up and touched his face, her fingers brushing over that morning's still-unshaved stubble. "I'll make you a deal," she said finally, watching as he raised both his eyebrows with a sudden eagerness. "First time you beat me up here when you come back over the summer, you can have your kiss."

Alex blinked at her. "You've never beat me on a run," he pointed out.

"Then I guess you've got something to look forward to," she replied, and patted him on the cheek before slipping out of his grip.

"Hi, I'm Tony," said the dark-haired man in the Black Sabbath t-shirt and ratty jeans, "and I'm an alcoholic."

Bruce blinked. "I'm pretty sure you're supposed to say that once the meeting starts," he noted, and turned back to his coffee.

The Saturday morning meeting in the musty church basement always seemed to be sparsely attended, but Bruce liked that about it. He'd drifted from meeting to meeting during his first few months in town, slipping into synagogues and public meeting rooms at the library before finally settling into a routine with the Lutheran church a few miles from his condo. The crowd shifted and changed like a chameleon, never the same group from week-to-week, meaning that the leader never pushed. Bruce reveled in the relative anonymity.

Or at least, he had.

Because when he glanced up from his Styrofoam cup, the man in the Black Sabbath t-shirt—Tony, or so he'd said—was watching him.

Bruce'd seen the other man at most the Saturday meetings, although he usually came late and left immediately after the group adjourned. Rumor around the communal coffee pot suggested he was some kind of celebrity businessman, supposedly more famous for his affairs with beautiful women than for his business acumen, but Bruce never read that part of the newspaper. In fact, Bruce no longer subscribed to the newspaper at all.

He found he did better when his memories of Betty lived only in his head, rather than in thousands of tiny, tangible reminders.

"Am I in your way?" he asked Tony when Tony kept standing at his shoulder and, for lack of a better description, staring him down.

"No," Tony answered. He indicated his already-poured, steaming cup of coffee. "But I've seen you

here for six weeks and you've never said a word, so I figured I'd better swing in as the ambassador for my people."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "What people are those?"

"Uh, totally non-functional recovering alcoholics who drink too much coffee," Tony replied, reaching for the creamer. "Or didn't you get the pamphlet from our tourism department?"

He finished the question by tipping his head in Bruce's direction, a tiny smile pressing at the corners of his lips. He reminded Bruce of some of his kindergarteners as they checked to see whether their jokes (usually about bodily functions) coaxed their teacher into a smile. Bruce bit down on his sudden urge to grin. "I tend to throw those straight into the recycling bin."

"See, then you're really missing out." Tony plucked the plastic stir stick out of his cup and gestured around the room with it. "I mean, how else can you appreciate the majestic glory of the poorly-lit bathroom and the dead, crumbling eyes of Sunday School Art Project Jesus—that's trademarked, by the way—without a pamphlet?" Bruce snorted and shook his head. "You're depriving yourself."

"Am I?"

"Absolutely," Tony pressed. He tapped Bruce on the arm, and Bruce—well-trained by short people who needed frequent attention—immediately lifted his head to meet the other man's eyes. "But, for the special, one-time price of totally free, I will give you the guided tour. Maybe even teach you the local language. There's an entire awkward weight-shifting dance that goes with our local custom of avoiding eye contact. You should really learn it."

Finally, Bruce couldn't stand on his grin any longer. "I've trained in that dance since I was a teenager."

Tony's returning grin nearly blinded him. "Then you'll fit right in around here," he declared, and led Bruce over to the circle of chairs.

The meeting felt like it went faster than usual, after that; the leader and sharers wandered through the same general topics, and the same types of tears were shed, but it became a bit easier to bear knowing that, every time he glanced up, Tony was there to raise an eyebrow at him. Bruce hadn't really considered trying to meet people in his new town—his life consisted mostly of work, reading, and his Saturday morning meetings—and the sudden surge of human interaction felt strangely good. Even if Tony was a playboy businessman and even if he never came to another meeting, at least Bruce could say he'd broken a six-month streak by speaking to someone besides his coworkers, his students, and the checker at the local Kroger.

And if Tony, for no apparent reason, picked up his coffee cup and walked away to refill it at the one point in the meeting that Bruce'd felt overwhelmed, well, that was a strange and lucky coincidence.

After the meeting, once Bruce finished his second cup of coffee and thanked the as he always did, he started up the steps to the parking lot. He was halfway up the stairs and already smelling fresh, late-spring air when a voice behind him asked, "How do you feel about milkshakes?"

He twisted around and discovered that Tony was at his heels on the steps, practically chasing him out into the parking lot. Bruce blinked in confusion. "Milkshakes?"

"Yeah. There's a diner not too far from here, best milkshakes you'll ever have." Tony shrugged. "And I figured, I'm a single guy beholden to nobody, you're a single guy beho—"

"I'm married."

The words tumbled out of Bruce's mouth without permission, and he froze as soon as he recognized them. A few other members of the group filtered by, nodding their goodbyes and wishing Tony a good rest of the day, but Bruce just stood there. When they were alone again, he wet his lips. "I—"

"I get it," Tony said before Bruce could stumble through an explanation. He shrugged again, almost too casually, his eyes sweeping over Bruce's face. "Around here, it's usually one of three categories: divorce, accident, cancer. And while cancer generally comes without the complete catatonic unwillingness to even *think* about talking to somebody, divorce generally comes without the ring."

Bruce glanced down at his left hand, slowly curling his fingers into a fist. He forgot about his ring most days; even now, sense memory demanded he put it on every morning and take it off every night. "Drunk driver, about a year ago," Bruce said quietly. It was the first time he'd spoken the words aloud to anyone except his new principal—and even then, he'd explained only under a certain amount of one-eyed staring. "She was coming home from teaching an evening lecture, I was writing up lesson plans—"

"And the rest is history," Tony finished.

Bruce nodded, swallowing around the last few words that, somehow, had stuck in the back of his throat. He dropped his eyes to his hand again, aware that Tony kept watching him.

"Here's the secret about this place, not that Pastor Feels-A-Lot'll ever admit it: everybody's got their *something*. And I don't mean the catalyst for showing up here and dragging themselves through the steps, either, I mean the *big* something. The ghost that rattled its chains so hard that it kicked them down into the hole that brought them here." Bruce lifted his head just long enough to meet Tony's eyes. "We talk about whatever dark day brought us down these stairs," Tony said, gesturing to the walls around them, "and we talk about the way out, but we've got a silent blood pact about leaving the ghosts alone until they're ready to come out."

Bruce pulled in a breath. "And if they're never ready?"

"Then you and Mister Marley or whoever that creepy asshole from *A Christmas Carol* was can sort out your business in peace," Tony replied, and clapped Bruce on the shoulder.

They emerged into the April warmth almost side-by-side, Tony lagging a step behind but dangerously close to crowding into Bruce's personal space at any moment. Bruce tried to recall the last time someone over the age of six'd stood so casually close, but he couldn't; most of his colleagues still kept him at arm's length, thinking of him as the quiet kindergarten teacher who closed himself off in his classroom.

He knew that would need to change eventually. He just wasn't sure how exactly to get there.

"Next time, we go to the diner," Tony announced suddenly, and Bruce jerked his head up in time to watch the other man head toward a truly ridiculous red sports car. He stared at the spectacle the stranger made: lazy clothes, messy hair, and a car worth more than Bruce's own mortgage. "They have everything you could ever dream of. Chili cheese fries, French toast all hours of the day, you name it."

"And milkshakes," Bruce added.

Tony grinned. "And," he continued, holding up a finger, "there's this special force field right inside

the door where I don't need you to talk about anything you don't want to and we can eat in absolute silence. At least, for the first ten or so times we go there. After that, it's fair game."

Bruce couldn't help the smile that jumped onto his face. "That's an oddly specific force field."

"What can I say? I'm an oddly specific kind of guy." Tony fished his keys out of his pocket and then, suddenly, saluted with them. "I'll see you next time, hello-my-name-is-Bruce."

"I hope so," Bruce replied, and he was surprised to discover that he actually, whole-heartedly, meant it.

It was the week before her first day of school as an official teacher. Natasha had spent the year after graduation subbing for the district since she hadn't been able to land a full-time job. She'd subbed for the fifth grade social studies teacher the previous March, and it was then that Clint Barton came into her life.

He spent the morning before the kids walked in apologizing for the lousy lesson plans that were left behind and helped her scrap together a useable list of activities for the day. When she'd survived the Tuesday—filled with a school assembly, a puker, and surprise walk-through from the one-eyed principal—Clint had told her she should keep an eye out for the P.E. position that would be opening up. "And," he added with a smug smile, "I have an in with the specials team lead; I'll put in a good word for you."

Things had worked out, and a month later, she'd been hired. The plan for the summer was to count down the days till July when Alex was home for a two-week leave and celebrate as much as they could before he was redeployed to Afghanistan. Except in June his fighter jet crashed and she spent that time in July helping Alex's mother make funeral arrangements.

So when Clint walked into what was now her gym a week before school started to congratulate her on the job, she knew why his face fell. She'd seen her reflection in the mirror and knew her appearance showed how she was a black shadow of her former self.

"Hey," he greeted with a half-grin. "Just wanted to see how you're settling in."

"Fine," she answered. "And thanks for the help getting me hired on."

He shrugged. "Someone gave me a chance when I got put on staff; nice to return the favor. So Phil's your mentor teacher, huh?"

"Yeah, any tips on how to stay on his good side?"

"Sure," he smirked, "but that would require him to cheat on me with you, and I don't think that's going to happen."

She nodded at the joke but didn't react any further. It caused the man's eyes to crinkle in concern. "You okay? Stressed about school starting?"

"Rough summer," she answered. She felt her chin rise in a silent challenge for him to push for more information, but he just nodded and gave her a quick once-over with steady eyes.

"Well, if you need anything, you know where I am," he offered. He was almost out the double doors to the hallway when he turned around. "Ties," he told her.

"I'm sorry?" she asked with confusion on her face.

"You want to get on Phil's good side?" he asked with a dangerous smile. "Get him ties."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Does he not have enough?"

"Nah, he has too many. I'm devising a plan to take care of that."

"I don't want to know, do I?"

His laughter echoed in the gym as he made his exit.

She managed to get a couple of hours of quiet to get some work done before her cell phone went off. It was Alex's mother doing her weekly check-in. Natasha knew she meant well, but the woman hadn't bothered to get to know her after Alex was with her for almost five years, and it pissed Natasha off that she was trying to now. She understood, somewhere deep down, that the woman was just trying to cope with the loss of her son, but Natasha wasn't in the mood to be some safety blanket, some link tying his mother to Alex. Nat had her own grieving to do. Granted, it mostly involved vodka and trading sporadic emails with James while he too was overseas.

Natasha ignored the text while marking the time; she had an hour to respond before the woman started calling her, which would be so much worse.

She was too caught up in her thoughts and memories to hear her new visitor slip into the gym. Natasha didn't notice his presence until he was ten feet away from her at least. "How's it going?" Phil asked.

"Decently. I think I'm about done for today. How's the library coming along?"

"Almost ready. Listen, the specials teachers are going to get together for some kind of outing before school starts. May wants to go bowling, but if you have any other suggestions—any other at all—I'm more than welcome to hear them."

She felt the faintest smile tugging on the corner of her mouth. "Not a fan of bowling?"

"Not particularly. But it beats out Stark's idea of karaoke." She physically shuddered at the thought. "Exactly," he said. He paused to give her a stare down, too. It wasn't as intense as Clint's, but it still left Natasha feeling vulnerable and bare. "Why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow night? We can start some weekly get-together in order to get your out-of-school meeting hours out of the way for your mentorship."

She shook her head. "That's not necessary. I don't want to intrude."

"Your loss," a voice said behind her causing her to jump. "I make kick-ass food."

Natasha spun to see Clint walking up behind her. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Iowa."

"Our house," Phil ordered, "tomorrow night at six. Bring dessert."

And ties, Clint mouthed behind Phil with a waggle of his eyebrows.

With that, the two men turned and left the gym, talking quietly with each other. Natasha was left standing there wondering what exactly had just happened. And, more importantly, who these two men were who had just taken her under their collective wing.

She felt something inside of her that took her a minute to recognize. It felt foreign because it was

something she certainly hadn't felt in the last month, and probably not since the last time she got to see Alex eight months ago. For the first time in too long, she felt the slightest hint of not being completely alone.

Love and War

Pepper sipped her hot tea and curled into the corner of the couch, ready to read through the therapy journal she'd received in the mail that afternoon. Tony was next to her on a channel surfing binge. She knew that this wasn't a display of her husband's ADD—at least, not this evening—but rather an indicator that he couldn't get his mind to stop thinking about his best friend.

It'd been a week and a half since Tony had presented his ultimatum—one that Pepper strongly fought against—to Bruce. Since then, the two men had been avoiding each other like the plague. This was frustrating for Pepper since it caused Tony to spend all his time with her. Normally Pepper could call in Rhodey as back-up, but the social worker was on vacation in Florida to escape the bitter cold of January.

It's not that Pepper didn't love her husband—of course she did. It was just that Tony Stark was a lot to handle (and would absolutely crack a penis joke at that statement). Pepper appreciated his network of friends who were willing to step in and help her handle Tony's Tonyness. But for the last week, she'd been left on her own to deal with him. And what was worse was the constant pouting because Bruce "was too busy probably having non-stop sex with the Russian" to talk to him.

Pepper felt her temper snap as Tony sighed for the third time in ten minutes. "Do that one more time, and I'll smother you with a pillow."

"Sorry," he apologized meekly.

The small tone in his voice made her feel guilty, but only marginally. She was mostly about ready to drag Bruce and Tony into her office and make them settle whatever this was between them like she had to do at least three times a week with students. Her counselor brain told her to let the two men resolve their issues on their own. But Pepper really wasn't sure how much more whining, sex, and whiny sex she could endure.

"Will you please just call Bruce?"

Tony shook his head. "He made it pretty clear the last time we talked that he wasn't happy with me. And if he can be happy with her, then I don't want to disturb."

"Of course you want to disturb. You want every nitty-gritty detail about their relationship, not that you'll get anything out of either Bruce or Natasha." His only response was to switch the television from a show about two idiots with metal detectors to *Sportscenter*. "Tony."

"Pepper?"

"You can't just sit here and brood until the end of time. You have to do something about this."

"Tried that, and he told me to fuck off, so..."

"I'm sure that's not what he meant."

"Well, it's what he said."

Pepper shook her head as she plucked the remote out of his hand and turned off the flat screen. "He may have said it, but we both know Bruce has a temper that can get away from him from time to time." Tony gave a half-hearted shrug in response. "And you both have said things to each other

that neither of you meant. But you've never let them fester like this."

"If he can be happy with her, then he doesn't need me."

"Tony," Pepper sighed, "are you happy with me?"

That caused his head to snap at her; from the look on his face, he was questioning her sanity. She'd agreed to marry him, so the concern was warranted. "Of course I'm happy with you. My life has been infinitely better since you came into it."

"And do you still need Bruce around?" Tony hesitated in his answer, his mouth trying to form words but ended up stuck in his throat. "You're allowed to say yes."

"Yes," he answered quietly.

"Then what makes you think that, even if he has Natasha, he doesn't need you, too?"

Tony stared off into space, and Pepper watched his mind work—one of her favorite pastimes. "I'll try and talk to him into restarting the milkshake mandates after our meeting on Saturday morning."

"Or you could call him now."

"Or I could wait until Saturday." Pepper sighed. It was about as good as any response she was going to get. "Hey," he said, nudging her knee with his own, "sex with redheads is time and thought-consuming in the best way possible."

He began to move towards her on the couch, a predatory leer on his face. Pepper stopped him with a hand planted to his chest. "No."

"What?"

"No. I'm sexed out. Go play in the garage."

"Please," he whined. "We can do that thing you love."

"No."

"Fine," he pouted as he rose from the couch. "I'll go tinker."

"And please don't tell me whether or not that's a euphemism."

"Alright, well, feel better."

Phil looked over the top of the newspaper as Clint stuck his phone back into his back pocket. "Natasha?"

Clint nodded. "Said she wasn't feeling well and canceled coming over for dinner. Again."

Phil easily recognized the hurt in Clint's voice and agreed with its presence. Natasha came over for dinner every Tuesday and had for five years. The only times they didn't get together for a meal was when one of them traveled for a summer vacation. Even when Natasha came down with a rare cold, Clint was sure to deliver soup to her doorstep. But this was the second week in a row where she'd backed out at the last minute. "What do you think's going on?"

Clint shrugged. "She hasn't said anything to me about whatever's happening. She talk to you?"

Phil shook his head as he folded up the newspaper and set on the end table away from Birdie, who was eyeing it as a potential chew toy. "But she's more likely to open up to you than me." He shrugged. "You know her, she'll talk to us when she's ready. And if we try and push her, it will just blow up in our faces."

Clint nodded his agreement before running hands down his face with a sigh. "Is it wrong that I'm a tiny bit glad she's not coming over? I mean, I'm not happy that she's obviously not happy, but I'm way too tired to cook."

"And clean, apparently," Phil quipped as he looked around the living room.

Clint flipped him off as he sank into the other end of the couch. Birdie let loose a low growl at him moving into her personal space, but stopped when Clint nudged her rump as a warning. "Can we just order pizza and go to bed at like seven?"

Phil smiled. "That bad of a day? How many times did Corbin's mom email you?"

"I only got three from her; she must've had actual work to do this afternoon. But then again," he said as he arched his hips up to retrieve his phone. When he read his new email, a series of impressive swears rolled off his tongue.

"What's wrong?"

"Kimmy's mom replied to the weekly newsletter email to let me know that her daughter got her period and if she asked to go to the bathroom in the next few days it would be for valid reasons—let's not even talk about how much I hate this is a thing I have to deal with—but she hit the wrong button when she sent the email. Instead of 'reply' she hit 'reply all'."

"And sent it to all the fifth grade parents?"

"Yep." Clint groaned and let his head fall back onto the couch. "This is somehow going to end up being my fault."

Phil bit down on the smile threatening to break out on his face. "I'm going to have to have pity sex with you tonight, aren't I?"

"You make it sound like such a chore."

Phil rose from the couch and made his way into the kitchen. Once Birdie realized his destination, she trotted after him. "I already fed you," he admonished as he reached for the drawer chock full of takeout menus. "What do you want?"

"Pizza. But not from the place down on the corner. That did something bad to me last time."

"Sure it wasn't the fact that you ate half of an extra large in one sitting?"

"Don't mock me with your fancy logic. What about Louie's?"

"They charge you an arm and a leg for mediocre food."

"Tight ass."

"Usually that's a compliment coming from you," Phil quipped back.

They settled for the chain with the best coupons and set about tidying up their house. Rarely did it get as messy as it currently was—even with Clint being his usual self—but the Accelerated Reader

program was in full swing, and they'd spent the weekend visiting Phil's younger sister and her family to attend their niece's piano recital. As a result, they were running low on clean underwear and most open surfaces were covered with charts and classroom score sheets awaiting verification.

By the time their dinner arrived, the kitchen and living room were picked up and Clint was on the couch folding laundry and actively keeping Birdie from burrowing into the pile of warm clothes. They ate their dinner in front of the TV, old reruns of *Seinfeld* keeping them entertained. Once they'd eaten, Phil set about dealing with Accelerated Reader papers in preparation for the meeting on the matter the following day. Clint alternated between helping his husband with score sheets and folding clean clothes. Birdie fell asleep at her post of guarding the piles of laundry awaiting to be put away.

A few hours later, they were crawling into bed. Clint groaned as he performed his nightly routine of removing his hearing aids. "Why didn't you stop me at four slices?"

Because you would've seen it as a challenge and eaten more regardless, Phil signed.

Clint shrugged in response as he climbed under the sheets. "Any chance of you rubbing my belly and then maybe rubbing other things?"

Phil sighed wearily at the offer. Some nights it was hard to believe that a guy as great as Clint agreed to be his husband, and on nights like this, it was hard not to constantly roll his eyes.

"C'mon," Clint said as he poked two fingers into Phil's ribs. "I'm pretty sure I remember hearing something about pity sex."

"You're incorrigible," Phil replied.

"Encourageable?" Clint asked in response as he slid his fingers under Phil's shirt. "It's hard to read lips in the dark. Take pity on your deaf husband."

"This is a horrible idea, right?"

"Correct."

"We should definitely not be doing this."

"That's very astute of you."

"But." Darcy stopped fiddling with her cell phone to finally look across the table. It was early enough in the afternoon that the Unblemished Bean was pretty much empty—except for them, a college student surrounded by textbooks, and a girl with a beaten-up acoustic guitar and warbling voice.

"But?" Loki asked.

"We're not *not* doing this."

"It appears so, yes," he replied, and forced a smile as the barista brought over their coffees.

Darcy smiled, too, but with a little less fake politeness. She hadn't really expected Thor Odinson's serpentine younger brother—Jane's description, by the way—to show up at her favorite coffee shop on a Wednesday afternoon and offer to buy her a drink. In fact, she thought maybe his proximity and weird niceness was a sign of the apocalypse. But she'd taken the whole afternoon off

for her dentist's appointment (clean bill of teeth, by the way), and hey, organic free trade coffee's expensive.

Then, Loki'd asked to sit with her and suggested they split an enormous no-bake cinnamon roll.

And now, here they were, on their second coffees and—

"Although," Loki said, and Darcy lifted her eyes from her cup just in time to watch him lean his elbow on the table. "We agreed we wouldn't kiss again—"

"You mean I decided we wouldn't kiss again and you played along, because I am a fantastic kisser?" Darcy interrupted.

He pursed his thin lips. She remembered pretty clearly how awful kissing those thin lips had been. "That's a creative reimagining of New Year's Eve."

"I'm not reimagining anything," she shot back. She pointed a finger at him, which for some reason made him grin. Jane'd always warned her about Loki—how he liked causing trouble, a greasy-haired lord of man-mischief—but seriously, seeing his eyes spark with evil mirth made her a believer. "We kissed, I *noped* out, the end."

"Without asking my feelings on the matter, as I recall."

"Because you didn't get a say in it." She brushed her hair behind her shoulder. "I needed a kiss, and the only other boys in the house were under the age of consent. You had to do."

He hid a grin in his coffee cup. For the briefest of seconds, he actually looked attractive, his head dipped and his eyebrows raised. "Please, continue. My ego needed the bruising, today."

And for some inexplicable reason, Darcy burst out laughing.

The whole thing felt stupid, in a way, drinking coffee with Loki like they were secret agents waiting for their mark to wander in. Not because she wasn't enjoying the coffee. If anything, that was the problem. She'd avoided talking about her winter break babysitting stint with Jane for two weeks, afraid that she might admit to the stupid kiss; once she'd broken down and told her friend (halfway through their second bottle of pink moscato; leave it to Jane to know her way into Darcy's secret heart), Jane'd just laughed. "Did you learn your lesson?" she'd asked.

"There's a lesson to me kissing a guy who doesn't know what he's doing?" Darcy'd shot back.

Jane'd chuckled, shaking her head. "Thor loves his brother, and I love Thor, but he's not the kind of person you want to spend quality time with. Better you find out by forcing him into a horrible kiss than somewhere else down the line."

"Uh, what *line*?"

"The one where you decide to add him to your long list of awful ex-boyfriends," Jane'd returned, and then, she'd topped off their glasses.

Darcy knew, at least intellectually, that her best friend meant well. They'd shared enough secrets about their crazy families and misguided life goals to polish off every bottle of fruity pink wine in the country. But something about her tone and laughter'd reminded Darcy of all those years when her mom'd muttered things about heavily-pierced serial killers every time Darcy'd brought a boyfriend home.

Not that she intended for Loki to become her boyfriend. She just didn't think the guy needed to get shat on by his sister-in-law, you know?

"Why does Jane hate your guts?" she asked, and Loki nearly choked on his coffee. A little foam ran down his chin, and Darcy rolled her eyes as she handed him a napkin. "Sorry, but I just realized that for two people who love Thor, you don't really like one another very much."

"I'm not certain I'd admit to loving my brother," Loki defended from behind his napkin.

"Bullshit. There's no way you watch every Minnesota Vikings game with him because you're into football. Your jeans are way too skinny for that." Even though she couldn't see his mouth, she caught his smile in the way his eyes brightened. "Jane's the most lovable person in the world, and you're—" Every appropriate adjective flew out of her head. Worse, Loki rolled his eyes at her. "Well, you know."

"No, I don't, but I rather enjoy watching you work this out on your own." He set the napkin in his lap and leaned both his elbows on the table. "Go on. Which one of my countless redeemable qualities makes it unthinkable that Jane would dislike me?"

"There's got to be something."

"Fifteen minutes ago, you compared kissing me to nuzzling a dead fish." Darcy flinched, but he waved the comment away with a flick of his wrist. "My brother met his 'lady Jane' during a time when I wasn't particularly pleased to be a member of the family," he continued, his eyes not quite meeting hers. "I made some rather unfortunate comments about my brother and his, shall we say, reputation with other women prior to meeting your friend." Darcy grimaced. She knew from their wine-drinking gab fests that most of Jane's pre-Thor boyfriends weren't serious. Actually, Jane'd once called one of them *useful, like a back-scratcher*. "It ended poorly."

He rolled his lips together as he said this, and Darcy bit the inside of her cheek. She meant to keep her mouth shut, she *really* did, but his sad-puppy face somehow made it harder instead of easier. "She slapped you?"

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "I believe a closed fist is generally referred to as a punch, but yes."

Darcy physically recoiled. "Dude, you know she got kicked out of the YWCA's kickboxing class for hurting people accidentally, right?"

"I know that now, yes." And it was stupid, really, but the way his smile grew actually made Darcy feel a little less awful about the dead fish comment from when they'd first sat down.

They finished up their coffee after that, chatting mostly about work—turned out, Loki was finishing his master's degree in history while teaching a couple undergrad classes, weirdly enough—and their hobbies. Loki shared the fact that he hadn't picked up his brother's construction brawn but knew how to whittle (what living human actually knew how to do *that*, anymore?), and Darcy admitted that she'd spent the last three days not talking to her mother after a "when are you going to move out and do something with your life?" fight. More than once, Darcy caught herself laughing and thinking *he's not as bad as Jane thinks*.

Aside from the whole part where he'd basically called Thor a man-slut in front of brand-new-girlfriend Jane, that is.

The sky was starting to turn purply-pink as they walked out, a sure sign that daylight saving time

was once again fucking with Darcy's love of a long, leisurely afternoon. "That wasn't too horrible," she decided as she wrapped her scarf around her neck. "Jane should give you a second chance."

"At this point, I have a reputation to maintain," Loki replied, slipping on his gloves. Darcy grinned at him, and he ducked his head. "I did have a good time," he admitted after a few seconds of staring at the salt-stained sidewalk. "Perhaps we can even do it again, in the future."

"If you're buying, I'll drink more coffee." He raised his eyes, and Darcy felt her throat tighten. For a guy who regularly pissed off his sister-in-law, he knew how to smolder. "Or, you know, eat dinner or see a movie. Whatever you're up for."

The corner of his mouth twitched into something like a smile. "I would hate to subject you to any more fish-related incidents."

"Eh, I spent my sophomore year of college as one of those 'I only eat fish' vegetarians. I'll survive." When he finally surrendered to an actual smile, Darcy surrendered to the warm feeling in the pit of her stomach and, stretching up onto her tip-toes, kissed him on the cheek. Loki exhaled sharply, filling the air with a cloud of breath, and she squeezed his arm for a second before stepping away. "Text me," she told him, walking backward toward her car. "And not after the socially-acceptable two weeks. I get bored."

"You have a different flower painted on each of your fingernails," Loki replied. "I figured out your penchant for boredom an hour ago."

She laughed at him and, because he *was* still Thor's serpentine younger brother, flipped him off.

Hey, man. He deserved it, okay?

"God, you're a sight for sore eyes," Bucky announced, plastering his hands to Steve's hips and pressing his chest against Steve's back.

Steve laughed. "You saw me at lunch."

"Yeah, and that was an extremely long time ago," Bucky retorted before he pressed his mouth against the back of Steve's neck.

Steve swatted at him, but not with any sort of force. The students had cleared out almost an hour ago; now, the setting winter sun glinted through Steve's classroom windows as he tried to organize clay for the next morning's projects. *Try* being the operative word, because Bucky pressed closer.

"I thought you had an Accelerated Reader meeting after your team meeting," Steve noted.

"Phil let us have a five minute bathroom break."

"A 'bathroom break?'"

"You know, a guy could get a PDA-related complex, the way you criticize me for not being able to keep my hands to myself," Bucky informed him. Steve glanced over his shoulder and ended up staring into bright, incorrigible eyes. Bucky waggled his eyebrows. "You started it, the other night."

"I started it?" Steve returned. Bucky's grin spread like wildfire through his stomach—and, predictably, much lower. "I was fine with making out, you know." Bucky's face crumpled in mirth, and Steve elbowed him lightly. "I'm not saying I'm complaining, just that it could've ended there."

Bucky slid two fingers into one of Steve's pockets and tugged until Steve turned around. It'd been hard enough to keep his hands off Bucky before now, but having seen him mostly-naked just a few days earlier felt like too much temptation. He spread his hands along Bucky's sides.

"You're a horrible liar, Rogers," he said, his head tipped up in a challenge.

"You keep saying that," Steve returned, and leaned down to steal a—

"Hey, none of that," a voice piped up from the doorway, and Steve flinched away to see Clint leaning into the room. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, revealing the full effect of his arms as he literally hung from the doorframe. "Phil specifically said I couldn't screw up the meeting time by dragging him into the supply closet. No tongue-related delays from you, either."

Bucky pulled a face. "Could you make it sound any less appealing?"

"You've met Stark, right? 'Cause 'tongue-related' is pretty low-hanging fruit, around here."

"And Low-Hanging Fruit is also your stage name, right?" Bucky retorted, and Clint burst out laughing. He also flipped the second-grade teacher off—weak revenge, really—before disappearing back down the hallway.

Bucky barely waited for his laughter to fade before he leaned in again, but Steve pressed a hand to the middle of his chest. "You're going to be late," he warned.

"Worth it."

"Not if you have to endure Phil's wrath, it's not." Bucky rolled his eyes, and Steve pushed him back a little further. He liked the feel of Bucky's chest, strong under his palm. He remembered listening to Bucky's heartbeat on the couch, once they'd tossed some tissues into the trash and tangled together, their half-unbuttoned pants only part of the way back to normal. He shook his head to clear away the memory. "Phil's serious about Accelerated Reader."

"And you're serious about your Phil Coulson Man Crush, patent pending," Bucky responded. Steve opened his mouth, ready to trip through a denial, but Bucky crowded in and immediately kissed the words away. "Don't worry, I'm not the jealous type."

"And I'm not the type to crush on a married man," Steve replied. Bucky tipped his head to one side like a curious terrier, and Steve smiled as he nudged him away again. "Go," he urged. "Otherwise, Clint's going to start telling people that you've bent me over the kiln or something."

"That assumes you'll be doing the bending," Bucky retorted, and Steve felt his cheeks warm as the other man finally ducked out of the art room.

He returned to sorting out boxes of clay—non-drying, colorful clay for the younger grades' "make your own monster" project, thick gray clay for the kiln-baked little bowls his older students would create—but within minutes, his mind started wandering. The longer Bucky was gone, it seemed, the more Steve's stomach churned around in circles and wanted him close again. He felt drunk on his nearness, like a teenager in love for the first time.

Of course, Steve hadn't been a teenager in what felt like a very long time. He hadn't dated back in high school, really, but he'd more than made up for it in college, tripping over himself with a number of guys who never quite felt like the *right* guy. He wasn't the blushing virgin that Tony accused him of being—Bucky'd laughed about that accusation after their date on Saturday, because apparently Steve was "way too good at that" to be a complete amateur—but he'd never played fast and loose with his heart. Maybe some people could date around, drifting from near-stranger to

near-stranger and having some fun, but he'd always caught himself looking at his dates as *the guy I could spend the rest of my life with*.

He sounded like a movie cliché, but he couldn't help it. When he'd explained the whole thing to his mother after a particularly ugly break-up, she'd just run her fingers through his hair and called him an old soul.

It felt overly generous to think of Bucky as someone special, inherently different from the other men he'd dated, but truth be told, that's how Bucky felt. Because after their fumbling on the couch—all grasping, desperate hands while they shared breaths and groans interspersed with hungry kisses—the needy, half-desperate desire to stay close to Bucky hadn't really disappeared. They'd texted back and forth all day Sunday, only for Bucky to surprise Steve Monday morning with piping hot coffee and a funny little smile. The last two school days—after all, it *was* only Wednesday, even if it felt like weeks since that Saturday afternoon movie date—had seen their e-mail boxes cluttered with quick little messages and funny notes.

One of the fifth-graders had even accused Steve of having a girlfriend. He'd blushed and steered her back to her watercolor, but it hadn't helped the warmth that blossomed in his stomach.

He hated being an old soul, sometimes, but not when it came to all the day-long daydreams and the weird way his breath caught whenever Bucky glanced his way across the hall and, for no reason in particular, smiled.

It meant that when the Accelerated Reader meeting was over, Steve was standing in the foyer of the school, his bag slung over his shoulder and his heart hammering in his chest. Bucky, who'd apparently carried his own coat and bag up to the library, grinned the second their eyes met. "Is it my birthday?" he asked.

Steve blinked. "I— What?"

"It's not every day that there's a guy waiting for me in the foyer with a hopeful look on his face," Bucky explained as he shrugged into his coat. Steve huffed a laugh at him. "It must be my birthday."

"I hope I'd come up with something better than waiting for you after a meeting on your actual birthday."

"I hope that waiting for me after the meeting'd be part of it," Bucky returned. Steve felt his cheeks warm. "So, what's up?"

"I," Steve started, but for some reason, the words caught in the back of his throat. For one brief, suffocating moment, the world narrowed until it was just Bucky in front of him: no foyer, no bright January bulletin board, no hint of Clint shouting loud enough upstairs for his voice to carry down the hallway. Steve wasn't a naïve college student embarking on his first relationship anymore, but that didn't stop one thought from flooding his entire mind.

I could spend the rest of my life with this guy.

"Steve?" Bucky asked, staring up at him.

"Have dinner with me," Steve blurted, the once-stuck words all pouring out at the same time. Bucky's face split into a grin; Steve found himself glancing away for a second, almost afraid to meet his eyes. "I swear, I'm usually a little more subtle."

"No, you're not," Bucky replied. When Steve looked up, it was just in time to watch Bucky reach

out and catch his hand. He threaded their fingers together easily, like they'd done it ten thousand times before and would do it another ten thousand times, and then tugged Steve toward the door. "Lucky for you, I wouldn't have you any other way."

Clint paused in his grading to roll his neck, but ended up jumping in his chair instead. "Jesus, Nat," he said, fingers splayed over his chest. "I thought I told you not to sneak up on deaf people." The woman, who'd appeared in his classroom, and seated herself in a nearby desk, apologized flatly. "You here to cancel *another* weekly dinner?" he asked.

That did cause her to grimace oh-so-slightly. "I've been busy."

"Busy being a loner and pushing people away, from what I hear. And I thought you canceled because you said you were sick."

She shot him a dirty look. "You going to be anything but pissy with me?"

"You're the one who walked in here." Her full lips pursed into a tight line. "What's wrong?" he prodded gently.

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

"It's obviously something, I haven't seen you this... empty in years."

She hesitated for a minute before answering. "There was a guy."

He felt his eyebrows rise in shock. "A guy? As in 'more than a one-time thing' guy?"

Clint leaned back into the rolling chair behind his desk, a location he rarely occupied during the school day, and watched Natasha pick at her nail polish. "It was supposed to be a one-time thing," she finally began to explain, "but then it became more, and..." She paused to shrug, her eyes still not meeting his. "It became more, and now it's nothing, and the whole reason I offered to do *something* with him in the first place was because I didn't think he would hurt me."

Her words settled into his stomach like a cannonball, and he tried to stamp down his overprotective streak. He was not entirely successful. "Who is he, and how badly do I need to hurt him?"

She rolled her eyes. "This is why I didn't tell you or Bucky."

He leaned forward in his chair and stared her down. "You didn't tell us because we know him?"

"I didn't tell you because you'd start thinking with your dick and then barge in with all the male posturing, and—"

"Nat, that's what friends do for each other," he said. "Like you ever skip out on the chance to hand me my ass whenever I screw something up with Phil." Her gaze turned back to the floor, so he rose from his chair and crossed over to crouch down in front of her.

"Hey," he said as he tapped a finger against the side of her sneaker. "You're obviously not okay."

"I'll be fine," she snapped back.

"You can bitch me out for posturing, but it's cool if you do it?" He ignored her eye roll. "Is he the first guy since Alex that you've had more than a one-night stand with?" Her small shrug was answer enough. He ran his hand over his face with a sigh. "Sweetheart, if you're that crazy about him, then why did you let him go?"

"I'm not crazy about him," she deflected.

"Tasha, you let him touch you with his penis on multiple occasions. Pretty sure that qualifies as crazy."

She scrunched her face up in disgust. "Why do you have to word it like that?"

"Would you rather I say something that might involve actual feelings? And don't avoid the question—why did you break up with him?"

"I didn't," she answered in a whisper.

Clint tilted his head and looked at her like she'd grown a third eye. "Who shot who in the what now?"

"You heard me."

"No, seriously," he said, head shaking from side to side. "This is not computing in my brain. You're *you* and someone said 'no thanks?' I just... what?"

"He had his fun and then he called it quits."

"I didn't think it was possible to run out of fun with you. I mean, I love Phil and all, but if I had to pick a chick? Absolutely, it would be you. Your rack is just—ow!" He ended his yelp of pain by rubbing the side of his head where she'd slapped him. Hard. "Watch the hearing aids, okay? And I'm trying to pay you a compliment."

She glared at him. "Don't ever talk about my breasts again. Besides," she said with a hint of a weary sigh, "we would never work."

"No shit." He paused to look up at her with a smirk and a waggle of his eyebrows. "But it would be fun while it lasted."

Exasperation was clear in Natasha's body language. "I really don't think you're as good in bed as you think you are."

"He is," a voice called from the doorway and the both turned to find Phil standing there with a small smile and sparkling eyes. "As well as outside of the bed—showers, back seats, supply closets..." His list was cut off by Natasha's groan and Clint's laughter as Phil moved into the room to join them. As he approached, Natasha and Clint both stood. "She already skipping out on another weekly dinner date with us?" Phil asked Clint.

"Not yet, but she has five days before the next one rolls around."

"I am in the room, you know," Natasha complained.

Phil looked her up and down, eyes all squinty (and sexy). "You okay?"

Clint watched another verbal brush-off form on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it instead. "Ask your missus; I'm sure he'd tell you everything anyway."

"Hey," Clint said, bumping his shoulder with hers. "Pay day happy hour tomorrow night. You in?"

She considered the possibility for the moment before shaking her head. "Not this time."

"You know you can call us if you need to talk, right?" Phil asked in that eternally patient and soft

tone of voice.

"I know," she answered. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

The men watched her go before Phil turned to his husband. "What happened to her?"

"Something that warrants me killing someone." He reached over to snag Phil's beltloop and jerked the librarian towards him until their bodies were pressed together. "You'll come visit me in prison, right? Conjugal visits and all that?"

Phil rolled his eyes. "We're going home."

"I don't fucking get it," Clint announced, throwing up his hands. "I mean, sure, Natasha can be a little prickly at the best of times, I get that, but who the hell kicks her out of bed?" He gestured at Steve with his half-finished beer. "Back me up here."

"Uh, you're barking up the wrong tree," Steve replied, and Bucky laughed as he squeezed Steve's leg under the table.

The regular pay day happy hour crew felt thinner than usual, almost all of them crowded around one long table and sharing some nachos in addition to their usual pitchers of beer (and iced tea for the teetotalers). Natasha begged off after she'd finished cleaning up vomit from one of the mats in the gymnasium, Darcy claimed to have important plans (meaning her mom'd demanded she clean off the DVR or lose her shows), and Peter Parker complained that his classy girlfriend's family was dragging him to the opera. Wanda, Ororo, Bruce, and Jasper were all seated at a table just a couple feet away, leaving just the normal crew at the big table: Clint and Phil, Tony and Pepper, he and Steve, and then—

"Fuck, I'll back you up," Carol chimed in. She snagged a couple more nachos and dropped them on her plate while everyone stared. "Wipe the smirks off your face, I'm still straight as an arrow—"

"Please don't tempt my husband," Phil interrupted dryly. Clint retaliated by swiping Phil's much fuller beer and replacing it with his own.

"—but Natasha is gorgeous." She sucked salsa off her thumb. "And you all know what they say about gymnasts, right?"

Clint groaned and muttered something about *mental images he could never unsee*, leaving everyone to look over at Tony for the answer. He and Pepper were seated in the middle of the table, not exactly part of the conversation but definitely avoiding the dark storm clouds that seemed to drift over to their table from Bruce's direction. Bucky'd noticed Bruce's mood days earlier, but let sleeping dogs lie; after all, he barely knew the guy, and he'd been a little busy.

As if on cue, Steve bumped their knees under the table and sent him a grin so warm, it made his whole body jump.

It meant that the next thing he noticed was Carol leaning over and snapping her fingers in Tony's face. Tony jerked out of whatever silent conversation he'd been having with Pepper and blinked at the blonde. She scoffed. "I just lobbed you the set-up for a completely filthy joke, and you missed it?" She glanced at Pepper. "Is he feeling okay?"

"Maybe all those years of smacking him in the nose with the newspaper are paying off," Pepper answered. Bucky detected something weird in her tone, but he couldn't place it. What he definitely did place was Tony opening his mouth only to have his wife shoot him a warning look.

"Who cares how bendy she is when you get her in bed?" Clint demanded. "The point is: there exists in the world a man who looked at Natasha—gorgeous, smart, and can kill you with her pinky finger if she feels like it—and said, 'Yeah, thanks but no thanks.'" He shook his head. "What kind of asshole does that?"

"A monumental asshole, that's what kind," Tony said suddenly. Everyone jerked their heads over to look at him, including the folks at the other table. Well, actually, make that everyone except Bruce, who kept his eyes trained on his glass.

Pepper sighed. "Tony—"

"No, no *Tony*, not right now," he snapped. It was the sternest Bucky'd ever heard him speak to his wife, and beside him, Steve ground his teeth together and flinched. "I don't care how emotionally maladjusted a human being is, it's still pretty shitty to look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially when another emotionally maladjusted person is maybe cheering you on the whole time." He abruptly pushed his chair back and stood up. "I need to pee."

Everyone else turned to watch him stalk across the bar like an angry wild cat, but Bucky kept his eyes trained on Bruce. Bruce turned his glass around between his fingers, but his head never lifted. If anything, he looked like he wanted to disappear into his shirt.

At the end of their table, Phil asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Trust me when I say it's a *very* long story," Pepper replied, and downed the rest of her vodka tonic before she stood up and disappeared in the direction of the bathrooms herself.

The table fell quiet, then, the five of them all glancing at one another while Jasper loudly suggested he buy Ororo and Wanda another round. Finally, Carol snorted. "Ten bucks says they do it in the bathroom."

"Men's or women's?" Clint asked.

"Does it matter?"

He shrugged. "I just wanna be able to tell them we did it there first, is all."

Phil shook his head. "I sometimes can't believe I married you."

"We all agree with that," Carol retorted, and the three of them laughed together.

Bucky, on the other hand, watched as Bruce quietly slipped off his chair, murmured something to the women at his table, and started to head toward the door. He was about to reach for his own coat when Steve put a hand on his leg. "Everything okay?" he asked quietly while Clint and Carol started arguing about an upcoming football playoff game.

"I'll be right back," Bucky promised, and then—because Steve was watching with big, worried eyes—leaned over and kissed him on the corner of the mouth before pushing out of his chair and following Bruce out the door.

The cold winter air whipped around the crowded Friday night parking lot at Xavier's, flipping up the open flaps of Bucky's coat. He scanned the lot for a second before he spotted Bruce, an entire aisle of cars away and fumbling with his keys. He knew if he waited, the guy'd climb into his car and leave.

It justified why he raised his voice when he called out, "You're not very subtle." Bruce's whole-

body flinch ground him to a stop, but it propelled Bucky forward, across the lot. "If I noticed, you know someone else will."

"You'd be surprised," Bruce said quietly, almost drowned out by the wind.

"Maybe," Bucky admitted. He shoved his hands into his pockets as he got to be about five feet away from Bruce. "I probably wouldn't've noticed a couple weeks ago, honestly. It's funny what hearing about your best friend's broken heart can do."

The other man snorted slightly and shook his head. "You're assuming a lot."

"No, I assumed a lot before. I assumed there was no way that you could be the guy she was sleeping with. Not because there's anything wrong with you, but because I can't remember the last time I saw Natasha that happy. I figured, whoever she was with, he wouldn't shit on her. You don't shit on somebody who cares about you."

Bruce lifted his head for a second. Bucky couldn't read the emotions trapped behind his face; he hid them behind an impenetrable mask of cold disinterest. Bucky wondered if you earned that mask after surviving a certain amount of heartache; Natasha certainly had the same one hidden somewhere in her arsenal.

"I think you're misunderstanding the situation," Bruce finally said, and reached for his car door.

Without thinking, Bucky surged forward and pushed a hand against the glass, pinning the door in place. He only realized how quickly he'd moved when Bruce looked up at him in surprise. "See, I don't think I am," he replied. He heard the heat in his own voice, but he couldn't help himself. "Do you know what Natasha's been through? Because if you did, you wouldn't dump her. Not like this."

"And what, exactly, is *like this*?"

"Enough that she talks about it." Bruce glanced away, and Bucky stepped closer, invading his personal space. "You've met her, Bruce. You know that she doesn't open up. She doesn't let anybody see her cracks, no matter how hard they look. And when she finally starts to open them up—enough that she tells me she's involved with someone in *any* form since the first time she lost Alex—you step right in and—"

"Because you know everything, don't you?" Bruce snapped. He smacked Bucky's hand off his car door hard enough that it stung; instead of climbing in, though, he squared his shoulders and looked directly into Bucky's eyes. "You know all about how this went down, how I'm an unfeeling asshole with no clue how to care about anyone, is that it? I didn't consider Natasha's feelings at all, I just fucked and ran, because that's the kind of person I am?" He raised a finger, jabbing it into the air between them and narrowly avoiding sticking it into Bucky's sternum. "Where were you in the last couple years, huh? Because you act like you're the resident expert on her feelings when you weren't even here until August."

"At least I can tell when she's not okay!" Bucky spat back, spreading out his arms. "Or did you miss the fact that she's not here tonight, that she's been lurking around school like a ghost—"

"Did you really catch that, or are you just piggybacking off Clint's comments because you were too busy groping your boyfriend?"

"—and that you've clearly done *some* number on her!" Bucky ground his teeth and, very slowly, stepped away from the other man. The wind whipped around them, cutting through his coat and messing up his hair. "I'm an asshole for not being here, maybe, sure," he said after a couple

seconds, his hands curling into fists. "I'm definitely an asshole for not believing her when she told me you were the guy she was with. But don't pretend that you're not the asshole for the rest of it." Bruce snorted again, a bitter sound, and Bucky shook his head. "You know what? On second thought, maybe it's good you dumped her like this. Because that means she won't get any more invested in you, and get to watch you run away like a coward the next time you get scared, or bored, or whatever has you running away this time. She's had enough heartbreak to last a lifetime; she doesn't need it from you, too."

For a second, Bruce's lips parted as though he planned to say something, but then he froze. When he pushed them back together, they formed a tight, pale line. They stared at each other, silent and still, before Bruce shook his head. Whatever words he'd planned on escaped as a puff of breath, and he climbed into his car seconds later.

Bucky stood there until he drove away, too.

Back inside the bar, he found that Pepper and Tony were still missing but that Carol'd ordered a fresh plate of nachos and another pitcher of beer. He wordlessly reached for the beer, filled his glass almost to brimming, and downed several hefty swallows.

When he dropped into his chair, he found that Steve was looking at him, his mouth creased into a frown. "Everything okay?" he asked quietly.

Bucky glanced at the glass in his hand for a moment. "If I told you I wanted to drink two giant beers, then go back to your place and make out with you until I can't think anymore, what would you say?"

Steve's lips kicked up into a tiny smile. "I'd say I reserve the right to ask you what's going on in the morning."

And for all the shitty thoughts swirling around in Bucky's head—concern for Natasha, anger at Bruce, frustration that he'd missed every one of Natasha's cues for what felt like months—his chest tightened and his stomach leapt. "You assume I'll be easy after a couple beers," he commented as the warmth climbed up his neck.

Steve shook his head. "No. I assume that, for whatever reason, you need me to be around right now."

"I need a whole laundry list of things, babe, and you can only give me so many," Bucky replied, but he pressed his arm to Steve's while he returned to his beer.

Making Assumptions and Amends

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, there is an attempt by some parties to right recent wrongs. Meanwhile, a few other people examine a situation and jump to conclusions that are just plain *wrong*.

The knocking started almost perfectly in time with Bucky popping the button on Steve's perfectly-pressed khakis. It was almost like a cosmic alignment, the tapping on his front door echoing the whisper of Steve's fly as Bucky eased it down—and the hammering of Bucky's love-drunk heart.

"Bucky," Steve warned, but in a breathless sigh. He flattened his hands against the fronts of Bucky's bare shoulders. Bucky thought for a second that Steve'd force him away, grumbling about the door, but then his fingers curled against Bucky's skin and pulled him closer. Bucky grinned and shoved down Steve's pants, his nose nudging the firm plane of Steve's stomach as he went. Steve's shirt had gotten rucked up as they made out earlier, a side-effect of demanding kisses and eager hands. Bucky took advantage of that, grazing his teeth along those perfect abs. It brought Steve's hips up off the couch cushion, his lips releasing a noise slightly like Bucky's name.

Bucky forgot about the khakis for a moment and shoved himself up, his hands splaying on Steve's thighs, to kiss him. He caught another of Steve's gasps in his mouth, swallowing the sound as he palmed Steve's—

"I fucking know you're in there, James!" a muffle voice shouted. It shook with barely-contained anger, hard and fast on the other side of the door, and Bucky broke away involuntarily. Steve gaped at him like a wounded animal, his kiss-bruised lips parting as the knocking turned to the kind of pounding that shook the door in its frame. "You have about ten seconds before I let *myself* in!"

"Shit," Bucky muttered, and clambered out of Steve's grip. His limbs felt clumsy and disconnected, but his lust-clouded mind was already starting to clear, recognizing Natasha's voice and anger two seconds too late. Worse, it recognized something else: lazily drunken college nights where, after he'd locked himself out of his apartment, Natasha'd broken them back in through the window or his flimsy screen door. He'd once seen her break a window screen using only the heel of a particularly-pointy dress boot.

He scrambled for the door without first scrambling for his shirt, dimly aware that Steve was half-naked and debauched on the couch behind him. He managed to undo the deadbolt just as Natasha slammed her fist hard into the door for the fiftieth time; the door sprung forward as he opened it, and he narrowly avoided losing his nose. Before he could ask, she stormed into his apartment. Her face was red and curls windswept, and she looked absolutely murderous.

"Nat, now is *really* not a good time," Bucky said. As he pushed the door shut, he managed to get a half-second glimpse of Steve. He was blushing head-to-toe, his shirt pulled back down but his khakis still around his thighs and unbuttoned. His boxer-briefs hid absolutely nothing. "I don't know what the hell's wrong with you, but it can probably wait until—"

"What the hell is this?" Natasha demanded, and before Bucky could process the question, she

whirled on her heel and shoved her cell phone in his face. He blinked at it until his eyes focused, then blanched.

Bruce Banner: *I'm sorry.*

Me: *For?*

Bruce Banner: *For hurting you. Even if it's for the best, I never meant to hurt you.*

Me: *Who said I was hurt?*

Bruce Banner: *Let's just say a little bird told me.*

"Nat," Bucky started, "it's not—"

"Stark is supposed to be the resident busybody," she cut him off, jabbing the phone into his chest. He flinched—she put a lot of force behind it—and the second she caught his expression, she jabbed him again. "*Not* you, and not *to* me."

She swept the phone out of his reach and then stormed across the room, as agitated as a zoo animal before feeding time. Steve, his pants finally back around his waist, slipped quietly into the kitchen. Bucky registered a pang of regret in his belly, but his attention mostly settled on Natasha. He'd seen her mad before, her seemingly endless temper snapping like a brittle old tree in a tornado, but rarely *at* him. In college, he'd loved sitting back and watching her eviscerate a daring freshman jock who groped her ass, or a professor who once told her *you know nothing of suffering, honey*.

Ring-side seats to the fight were a lot more fun than living it.

"Natasha," he said, and her head immediately snapped back around in his direction. He tried on his best, most sheepish smile, but the anger flashed across her face like lightning. "Look, I didn't mean anything by it, okay? But it got brought up at happy hour—"

"And you couldn't leave well enough alone?"

"Yeah, I *could*, but—" She raised an eyebrow at him, and he threw up his hands. "Okay, you know what, you're right? I couldn't. I couldn't leave it alone. Because you've been walking around like a ghost, and that's *not* okay."

"You mean you've pulled yourself away from Steve's dick long enough to notice other people?" she spat, her lip curled.

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Please, is that the best you've got? My sisters do worse when they're joking." She huffed at him, tossing her hair, and he took one cautious step toward her. "Once I put it together, I had to say something," he pressed as her sharp eyes narrowed. "God, Natasha, he *hurt* you. You started putting the pieces back together, and he broke them again. You really think I could just sit there and let him do that to you?"

For one brief, almost untraceable second, Natasha's whole face softened. Bucky's breath caught, hopeful he'd chased away the monster, but then the anger rushed back into her eyes and tightened her jaw. "Don't you dare turn me into a martyr."

He blinked at her. "I don't—"

She stepped forward, erasing the distance between them. Her eyes were as cold as he'd ever seen them, icy and unblinking. She'd worn cold, distant eyes after Alex died, eyes lost in grief; these

eyes promised that the world really would end in ice. “You’re not dumb enough to think hurt is a one-way street, James. If you want a wilting flower to nurse back into health, find someone else.”

“Natasha—”

“Someone else,” she repeated, and then rushed past him like a wind to walk out the front door. She slammed it hard behind her, leaving Bucky to listen to the heavy sound of her footsteps as she trekked down the stairs.

He stood in the middle of his living room for a long time before a warm palm touched his side. He’d forgotten that he’d left his shirt on the floor, and he shivered at the touch; Steve huffed a sound like a nervous laugh and stepped even closer. “You want to talk about it?” he asked after several seconds too long.

Bucky snorted at him and shook his head. “I don’t even know what to say,” he admitted, and let Steve silently brush his thumb along his bare skin.

Tony spent the whole meeting on a bitterly cold Saturday morning watching Bruce from across the room. He didn’t listen too much as the gathering in the church basement wore on; instead, he behaved like a jungle cat stalking his prey and waiting to pounce.

Bruce kept his eyes locked on his shoes the whole time, studiously avoiding everyone’s gaze from the moment he walked in three minutes late. Tony took a sip of his mediocre coffee as he once again tried to put the pieces of the whole thing together. Not so much the fact that his buddy—and despite the fact that the last couple weeks hadn’t been kind on their relationship, Bruce was still just that—had landed in the arms and bed of one Natasha Romanoff. No, that would be an equation for another day. For this morning, Tony was just trying to puzzle out why Bruce had taken Tony’s advice of “be honest about your feelings” as “dump her ass.”

He’d rambled about it—okay, part of that rambling was shouting—at Pepper for hours the night before once they finally left the bar for pay day happy hour. And, it should be noted, he wasn’t shouting directly at Pepper, just in her general vicinity. He’d paid his penance for snapping at her in front of everyone; he wasn’t going to make that mistake again. At least not twice in the same night.

Once the meeting wrapped up, Bruce bolted for the door and Tony followed his friend. He managed to snag the sleeve of the puffy, dark green winter coat Bruce’d worn for what seemed like every winter Tony’d known him, and stopped him in his snowy tracks.

“Please talk to me,” he pleaded. “If not for my sake, then Pepper’s.”

Tony caught the faintest tug at the corner of Bruce’s mouth for that one. “What is there to say?”

“In the middle of a parking lot in colder-than-a-witch’s-tit January? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. At the diner over chili fries?” He paused to shrug. “I think there’s a thing or two we could talk about.” A weary sigh was the only response Bruce gave. “C’mon, buddy. I’m trying to be all adult and mature-like. Help me out.”

“Because this is all about you?”

Even though the words were quiet, the bitter tone seeping in the syllables was easy to hear. “No,” Tony answered. “Absolutely not. But I can’t figure out how to fix this—” His hand rose to bat at the air between them. “—by myself. I’m smart, but not that smart.”

“If you’re just using this as another way to rub in the fact that you scored higher on the SATs than I did, I’ve got better things to do with my time,” Bruce shot back. But just underneath the words, Tony caught the faintest hint of warm humor.

He raised his hands palm up in the air. “No insults of intelligence. Promise. I’ll even call Pep and have her meet us over there if you want. She can mediate or whatever.”

Bruce rolled his lips as he weighed his options before expelling a breath in a cloud of warm air. “Fine. But you don’t need to drag Pepper out on a day like this.”

Tony nodded, already feeling slightly lighter. “Want me to drive?”

“I’ll just follow you.”

During the five minute drive to the diner, Tony ran through his speech a few more times. He did his best to inject as much concern and sincerity into it as he physically could, which for him still wasn’t all that much. He and Bruce slid into their usual booth, and the waitress walked over to confirm their typical order.

Before Tony could even start in with his rehearsed speech, Bruce muttered an apology. “Ummm,” Tony hummed, “don’t think you’re the one who should be saying that.”

“I snapped at you,” Bruce explained. “That alone deserves an apology.”

“You had valid points.” Bruce just shrugged at that. “I just— I’m going to need you to help me understand a few things. What did you hear me say in that discussion? Because all I wanted you to do was be honest with your feelings so you wouldn’t get hurt.”

“Yeah,” Bruce huffed bitterly. “That worked out perfectly.”

“It wasn’t supposed to work out like that at all,” Tony said. “I didn’t want for you to break things off. If anyone deserves an amazing lay, it’s you. You are basically a saint and deserve all the naughty loving you can get.”

Despite the faint smile on Bruce’s face, Tony could see old pain in the other man’s eyes before he dropped his gaze to focus on a straw wrapper. “There’s this kid in my morning class—Tanner. Dark hair?”

“Yeah, I know him.”

Bruce nodded as he began to twist the strip of paper. “He has this shirt that says *I’m the reason we can’t have nice things*. I wonder if they make it in adult sizes.”

Tony leaned back against the booth in an attempt to take in as much of his friend as he could. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about my parents and Betty. I don’t want something awful to happen to Natasha. It seems to be the trend for people who associate with me.”

“Hey,” Tony said in a sharp tone. It was effective in bringing Bruce’s eyes up. “That is fucking bullshit.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes it is. How long have we been friends? Has anything horrible happened to me in the last eight

years? I mean, yeah, there was the whole thing with Dad's company, but do you know how much worse I would've been if you weren't around?" His arms flapped in the air in an attempt to show how much flailing would happen in a Bruce-less life. "I'd be... Well, I don't know what I'd be, but it wouldn't be anything good, I can tell you that. I wouldn't work where I do, I'd never have met Pepper, I wouldn't have a group of batshit crazy people who are pretty much family."

Bruce shook his head. "You still would be—"

"Who started this?"

His long-time friend looked at him confused, unable to keep up with the new twist in conversation. "What are you talking about?"

"Between you and Red—who started it?"

"Umm, I guess she did."

Tony nodded at the answer he was fully expecting. "Have you ever known Natasha to get swept up in something and not being able to think clearly? I mean ever?"

"No, not really."

"Me neither. So she knew exactly what she was getting into—which was nothing bad. Because you are not bad. You never could be."

Bruce shook his head. "I hurt her," he admitted quietly.

Tony shrugged. "So fix it."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "It's not that easy."

"Yes, it is."

"Tony—"

"Buddy, the reason you can't have nice things is because you don't allow yourself to have them." He paused as their waitress deposited a steaming pile of chili fries between them. "Your dad was a piece of shit, and you're nothing like that. Your mom and Betty... What happened to them was horrible, but it was never your fault. So, yes, it is that easy."

The silence between them stretched out for several minutes before Bruce quietly asked, "What if it's too late?"

Tony weighed his options while slurping down on his milkshake. "You're never going to know unless you try."

"Tell me, brother, what is she like?" Thor asked conversationally, leaning against the wall of his office with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What is who like?" Loki replied, reaching for his coffee.

Thor laughed. "Come now!" he said, his voice booming through the office. "The girl you are obviously dating!"

Loki nearly sprayed coffee across Thor's computer monitor.

He'd agreed to spend his Saturday afternoon with his older brother for one, simple reason: the family's construction company depended on it. Thor ran the company competently, of course, but every six months or so he attempted to fill out a tax form or ledger and thoroughly screwed it up. Thor was smart in his own ways, but none of them involved math.

Or, apparently, interpersonal relationships, because he reached over to pat Loki on the back. Loki jerked away from him as though he'd been branded. "You can't expect you were keeping it a secret," he commented while Loki twisted around to glare at him. "Not with how often you've been texting, your mysterious excuses for missing Sunday dinner—"

"Needing to meet with my thesis advisor is hardly mysterious," Loki sneered.

"—or your unusually good mood." Loki narrowed his eyes, and Thor responded by raising his hands. "Well, excepting your mood right now."

"My mood is a reflection of my brother shoving his nose where it doesn't belong when I'm here to *help* him." Loki snapped his head back toward the monitor and resolved not to look at Thor again for the remainder of the afternoon. "I don't meddle in your personal affairs."

"You have in the past."

"In the past, I also painted my fingernails black to make an adolescent statement. Some of us mature, brother."

"I'm sure," Thor replied, but he still sounded amused.

Loki huffed a breath out through his nose and returned to the computerized ledger he was rebalancing, aware of Thor's eyes on his back. He'd attempted to be subtle in the last stretch of days—texting Darcy at times when he wouldn't be interrupting her work, finding plausible excuses to avoid family dinner to have coffee with her, darting in and out of his brother's house like a shadow in the night—but he should have suspected Thor'd sniff out his "odd" behavior. As much as Thor played the fool sometimes, he was exceptionally good at reading people.

Or at least, at reading Loki.

He flipped to the next page of the electronic workbook and, in the same breath, stopped worrying his lips together. "For your information," he said, employing the haughtiest tone he could manage, "we are not dating."

"No?" Thor asked from somewhere near the coffee pot. Loki suspected he was helping himself to some sort of snack.

"No. We are friends, I suppose you could say. 'Acquaintances' is probably the more appropriate title. We're simply being cordial."

"Most men do not hope to be *cordial* with attractive women," Thor commented. Loki could hear his smile.

"I am not most men," Loki retorted. He started comparing numbers to the paper ledger and scowled. "How did you manage to get three entries ahead when you entered the data into the computer?"

Thor snorted a sound like a laugh. "The boys had come to work that day. And do not change the subject. Why are you only cordial with her? Do you not want to be more than acquaintances?"

“I was unaware that being friends with a woman is a personal affront to you, Thor.”

“It’s not.” As Loki started straightening out his brother’s monumental clerical error, the other man came over and settled himself against the edge of the desk. Leaning there, his arms crossed over his chest, he looked massive. A behemoth among men, perhaps, ready to trample his younger brother into the ground.

Like during the worst of his playground torments, Loki recalled, when Hogun and Sif dared him to cross the monkey bars at recess and laughed when he fell to his knees in the pea gravel.

“Do you remember when we were young?” Thor asked suddenly.

Loki jerked his head up in surprise. “I was just remembering certain elements of that, yes,” he replied, his voice more acidic than he intended.

Thor’s mouth creased into a tiny, humorless smile. “You were always the cautious one of the two of us, calculating risk and reward like your life depended on it. I admired for years—especially when it kept Father from catching us red-handed at some mischief—but now I wonder if it hasn’t disadvantaged you, somehow.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “My caution is keeping you from running your business aground, right now,” he pointed out, but he suddenly couldn’t focus on the computer screen.

“Loki.” The chiding tone in Thor’s voice caused Loki to lift his head. His brother smiled almost coyly. “I employ a part-time accountant to manage the books. Do you really think I needed you to fix my mistake when I can call Andrea in on Monday?”

Loki snorted. “I think you like free labor.”

“Or time to speak to my brother,” Thor returned, and Loki huffed at him while he reached for his coffee. “You have lived much of your life waiting for a shadow around the corner, some shade who will sweep in and rob you of everything you’ve worked for,” he continued, and Loki watched the steam rise off his coffee. “And as often as you blamed it on other things—Father, me, your birth parents, the friends who mislead you over the years—I think it’s mostly borne of fear.”

“Not everyone can be as *fearless* as you, brother,” Loki sneered.

“That is true. But you do not need to be as ‘fearless’ as I am to be attracted to this young woman, Loki. Or to pursue her.” Thor paused, leaving a heavy, almost oppressive silence between them. When Loki raised his head, he caught his brother watching him contemplatively. “She is a young woman, correct?”

Loki frowned. “You don’t think I’m text messaging one of Mother’s bridge partners, do you?”

“No, no,” Thor quickly replied with another of his humorless smiles. He tightened his grip on his arms. “I have just never noticed you take much interest in dating, and I did not want to assume—”

“You think I’m dating a man?” Loki interrupted. It was louder than he anticipated, and Thor flinched in response. Behold, his mighty brother, the man who could stare down the largest contractor on a project without blinking but somehow still possessed the world’s worst poker face. “Thor, are you honestly trying to ask me whether I’m dating another man?”

“I—” Thor began to say, and then cleared his throat.

And Loki, for all his years of practiced composure, burst out laughing. “Oh, no, *do* go on. I want to

hear about this!”

At least Thor had the decency to turn red. “I was not meaning to slight you, only to ask—”

“No, please, *ask*,” Loki cackled, shaking his head. “I’d like to know how many times you tried broaching this with Mother before you lost your nerve. Have you Googled ‘signs your brother may be gay?’ I should look, right now, while I’m here . . .”

And sure enough, before Loki could even open the Start menu, Thor was grabbing for the mouse. “I will call Andrea on Monday, I think.”

“Not until I get a good look at your browsing history, you won’t,” Loki promised, and left Thor huffing curses under his breath.

“Did your husband and his boyfriend break up or what?”

Pepper glanced up from her cup of oatmeal to discover Clint darkening her office doorway. “What?”

“You know what.” As she watched, Clint lifted his shoulder away from the doorjamb and wandered over to one of the chairs in front of her desk. She helped herself to another mouthful and chewed slowly. “Don’t get me wrong, Banner’s hardly a ray of sunshine on a normal day, but Tony’s storming around here like a pissed-off typhoon.”

“You have *met* Tony, right?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s how I know that ‘typhoon’ is normal but ‘pissed-off typhoon’ is a whole ball of weird.” Clint dropped himself into a chair, his legs sprawled out like he owned it. “That is their whole deal, right? They had some sort of platonic life-partner spat? ‘Cause they’re both pretty walled off lately, and that’s the best answer I’ve come up with.”

Pepper jabbed her spoon into her oatmeal and tried very hard to keep her face neutral. She knew more about the recent *Days of Our Elementary School Lives* drama than anyone on staff excepting maybe Bruce and Natasha themselves—though if Tony was to be believed, neither party to the “god forsaken interpersonal nightmare” had a clue how the other really felt. But she respected Bruce and Natasha’s privacy no matter how hard Clint stared her down. She knocked a blueberry across the top of the oats and then glanced back up at him. “They had a disagreement,” she finally answered, “but they spent the weekend trying to fix it.”

Clint raised his eyebrows. “About?”

“Excuse me?”

“They had a disagreement about . . . what? Kirk versus the lightsaber guy? The new *1-2-3 Math* update Tony refuses to download ‘cause he’s got a thing against Java? Taping over some old *Godzilla* movie with a newer *Godzilla* movie?” Pepper chuckled and rolled her eyes, but Clint leaned in. He rested his elbows on his thighs and watched her carefully. “C’mon. What’s the real story?”

“There’s no real story,” Pepper promised. She’d learned to maintain a poker face long ago. “They fought—”

“Which they never *really* do,” Clint pressed.

“—they made up—”

“After acting like they’d spent a week at a funeral.”

“—and now, hopefully, all the hurt will be mended.” She said it dismissively, with a small shrug of her shoulders, but knew the second she did that she’d picked the wrong word. Clint, after all, was staring at her, his eyes slightly wider than usual. She forced a smile. “Their hurt,” she clarified. “Their hurt, from one another, will be mended.”

“That’s not what you meant,” Clint accused. He pointed a finger at her, reminding her instantly of the gesture Tony used when he started to win an argument. She at least managed to roll her eyes in response. “You’re talking about somebody else.”

“I promise I’m not,” she replied, and picked up her oatmeal.

“Listen, Potts, I don’t know who you think you’re fooling, but you can’t pull some bait-and-switch on me and expect—”

“Hey, yeah, sorry to cut into the girl talk,” a voice blurted breathlessly, and Pepper and Clint both lifted their heads as Darcy ducked into the doorway. “Daisy Nunez just walked into the front office and started bawling her head off, and that is *so* far above my pay grade it is not even *funny*.”

“I’ll be right there,” Pepper assured her, and put down her cup of oatmeal. She felt Clint’s eyes following her as she straightened her skirt and slid her shoes back on. “Sorry to cut this short, Clint.”

“Like Tony’s sorry about whoever he hurt before it trickled back to Bruce?” he asked.

Pepper chuckled and squeezed his shoulder. “Nice try,” she replied, and then abandoned him in her office to stew.

“Something is *so* rotten in the state of this place,” Darcy said and dropped into the chair in front of Jasper’s desk.

Jasper frowned over the rims of his glasses. He had a massive stack of standardized testing paperwork to fill out. Also, he was trying to finish a pretty damn important Yelp review of the new bistro that just opened up across down. (Verdict? Shit. Steaming shit served on small plates. And crunchy quinoa, which, as far as he was concerned, should be a federal offense.)

“Do you need something?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah. Intel.” She kicked her feet up onto the corner of her desk. He considered knocking them off, but her heels were pretty enormous and had tiny spikes on them. He’d like all his parts to remain in the proper geographical location, thanks. “Come on,” she goaded while he went back to typing. “Didn’t you go to Xavier’s Friday night? I had to be somewhere else, but there was apparently some epic Natasha story that nobody’s repeating.” She paused. “And Clint swears that Rogers and Barnes were trying some hand action under the table, but that—”

“I swear to Christ: if you ruin sex for me, I’ll have you fired.” Darcy cackled as he tried to shudder that particular mental image away. No offence to Rogers and Barnes, of course; he just didn’t bat for that team. “And no, I wasn’t at Xavier’s. I had plans.”

“Plans?”

“Are you a fucking parrot? Yeah. Plans.” He turned back to his computer screen. “I’m allowed to go out with people besides you assholes.”

“Allowed, yes. But you usually don’t.” The heels disappeared and, suddenly, Darcy was leaning all the way forward, her folded hands resting on the edge of his desk. He picked up a pencil and prodded at them. “What kind of plans?”

“Just plain, old-fashioned plans.”

“Not *sexy* plans?”

Jasper felt heat creep up the side of his neck. Goddamn her, nosy-ass little—

“Word on the street is that Stark and Banner are in the middle of a huge man-spat,” he ground out through clenched teeth. He hated participating in the perpetual gossip machine that was his workplace. Oh, he gathered up every juicy rumor he could, sure, but he didn’t spread that bullshit around. It just helped to know when Barton and Coulson planned to take their next mutual “sick” day or how much Stark’d pissed off his wife this time. Either way, he knew Darcy’d be like a slaving dog with a hambone, so he raised his hands in defense. “Don’t know about what, though if I had to guess, it was Stark spouting off unsolicited, unhelpful advice and Banner resisting the urge to punch him in the face. But what do I know?” When he glanced over, he caught Darcy frowning at him. “What?”

“Everybody knows that Tony and Bruce are pissed at each other. How is that even news?”

“Hey, that’s all I got,” he defended. “Nobody over the age of eleven voluntarily tells me *shit*, and the little ones just rat out their friends to save their own asses.”

Darcy heaved a sigh and, finally, levered herself out of the chair. “This is why you should go to happy hour.”

“I could say the same about you, *chica*,” he retorted. She grinned over her shoulder, a little like some kind of silky-haired shark, and he rolled his eyes as he turned back to the computer.

He was just getting to the part about the gelatinous mass that claimed to be hummus when Darcy said, “I hope you at least got laid.”

His keymash was totally fucking undignified, and worse? He could hear her laughing for, like, ten entire minutes afterward.

Jane sat for just a moment in the quiet garage as she steeled herself to enter her home. She loved her husband and children dearly, but with the name Odinson came an overwhelming amount of noise. Taking a deep breath and soaking the last bits of silence she was going to get for the evening, she walked out of the garage to find the house relatively calm. She kicked her heels off in the mud room and moved into the kitchen to find Darcy sitting at the table with Alva.

“Mommy!” the girl shrieked as soon as Jane was in sight. Alva quickly abandoned her coloring book to run across the kitchen and fling herself around Jane’s legs. “I missed you so, so, so, so, so much.”

Jane reached down to run fingers through her daughters sandy curls. “You saw me this morning, right?”

“That was a really long time ago, Mommy. I’ve had school and daycare and Miss Darcy since

then.”

“It is totally an epic long time,” Darcy agreed with nod and conspiratorial smile from the kitchen.

“What are you even doing here?” Jane asked.

“It’s Monday,” she answered with a look that said Jane should already know this. Jane gave a small shrug, and Darcy shook her head, her brown curls moving against her hoodie sporting the elementary school’s mascot of a knight. “Thor’s taking the boys out for dinner and then ‘man-time,’ which I’m terrified to even ask about.”

“Oh, right. I think he’s taking them to laser tag this time. Fingers crossed they won’t get banned.”

Alva bounced at her side. “What are we going to do, Mommy?”

Jane wanted to respond with something involving sweats, wine, and an early bedtime, but was fairly certain her youngest wouldn’t be okay with that answer. But said youngest hadn’t spent the day redrafting a grant proposal for the planetarium. “What do you want to do?”

“Can we go visit my horse?”

Jane suppressed a groan. Her mother-in-law had been incredibly kind to gift Henry, George, and Alva with horseback riding lessons, but it was a daily struggle to convince her daughter that the horse was not actually hers. She didn’t want to think about how much more difficult it would become when the riding lessons actually started in the spring. “Not today. What else do you want to do?”

Alva pursed her lips as she pondered her options. “Can Uncle Loki come over? He said he was going to show me a magic trick yesterday, but then he and Daddy started yelling at the football players. I think he forgot.”

“He’s teaching a class tonight,” Darcy answered. “Sorry, kid.”

Jane looked over at her with a puzzled expression. “He teaches on Tuesday and Thursday evenings.”

“Right, but his buddy had to go out of town for a wedding and didn’t get back till this afternoon, so Loki said he’d cover.”

“Why would you know that?” Jane asked.

“Because she’s been texting him,” Alva responded with an excited tone. “We took selfies and sent them to Uncle Loki.”

Jane shot an ugly look at Darcy. “You’re the reason my daughter knows that word?” Then, the end of Alva’s statement hit her with the force of the giant sledgehammer Thor used on construction sites. “Wait... You’re texting pictures of yourself to Loki?”

Darcy sat at the table quietly and only looking slightly chastised while thoughts began to come together in Jane’s mind. “When he was here yesterday, Thor tried to get him to fess up about... that’s you?” she finished in a squeak.

The younger woman shrugged. “We’ve hung out a few times, just a movie and some coffee.”

Jane shook her head as if doing so would cast off at least some of the overwhelming amount of

confusion drowning her brain. “I don’t— I mean, I just don’t get it.”

“Jane—”

“No, Darcy, seriously. I have a PhD in astrophysics, and I cannot wrap my mind around this.”

“It was just a movie.”

“After coffee, apparently, and a New Years’ kiss. With *Loki*.”

“You kissed him?” Alva squeaked. She finally detached herself from Jane’s legs and bounced her way to Darcy’s side. “Is he your *boyfriend*?” The young girl drew the word out like only an elementary school-aged person could do.

“No,” Darcy answered firmly.

“But you said you kissed him. When people love each other, they kiss. That’s what Daddy says.”

Darcy visibly shuddered. “Definitely not love either, kiddo.”

Alva turned to her mother with a fearsome look on her face. “Mommy, tell her that is what Daddy says, and Daddy is always right.”

Between trying to process the thought of Loki and Darcy together, Alva being Alva, and her day-long headache, Jane only had one response: “I need a drink.”

“Oh, Mommy, can I have one, too? Maybe some Kool-Aid?” Alva asked in an overly-sweet voice.

Darcy’s laugh served as an answer as she rose to find the appropriate Disney princess cup for Alva to use. “Water, trouble maker. Just because your brothers are out of the house doesn’t mean you get to have sugary drinks with dinner.” She gently bumped into Jane as she made her way to the sink. “Go upstairs and change,” she muttered. “You’re head is going to explode all over the kitchen and no one wants to clean up that mess.”

“Yeah,” Jane breathed. She made her way out of the kitchen and paused on the stairs to dig her phone out of her purse to send a text to Thor. *You will not BELIEVE who Loki is... Loki-ing with.*

Husband: *I do not understand that particular verb. And the boys send their greetings.*

Before Jane could send a response, she could hear Alva’s voice lilting from the kitchen. “Miss Darcy, if you marry Uncle Loki, can I be the flower girl at your wedding?”

“No one said anything about weddings!” Darcy shouted back.

Jane shook her head as she resumed her climb up the stairs. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Okay, who pissed in Natasha’s borscht?”

Phil choked on his mouthful of coffee hard enough that it burned in the back of his nose. When he glanced up from his usual planning-period indulgence—that is, perusing the Scholastic Book ordering catalogue and creating a massive, pie-in-the-sky library wishlist—he found Carol Danvers leaning heavily on the circulation desk. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Carol snapped, rolling her eyes. “Natasha’s wandering around this place like a little red thunderhead, and I want to know who I need to kill.”

"I didn't know you were that invested in Natasha's happiness."

"I'm not," she replied. Phil raised an eyebrow. "I'm *not*," she repeated, and crossed her arms over her chest. "Can't a woman look out for another woman without suspicious man-squinting?"

"Man-squinting?"

"Beady-eyed man-squinting." When Phil swallowed his laugh by taking another sip of his coffee, Carol sighed and leaned a hip against the circulation desk. "I knew I should've asked your arm candy."

"He's good for more than lifting heavy boxes, you know."

"Then prove it."

The hard edge to the back of her tone made Phil chuckle. He sipped his coffee again and then set the mug on the desk, turning it around in his hand for a moment. Unlike the majority of his colleagues, Carol wasn't a natural gossip; like most of his colleagues, however, she could probably be bought off with baked goods and cute boots. She peered steadily down at him, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know exactly who hurt Natasha," he admitted. Carol's mouth popped open, and he raised a hand. "What Clint told you all at happy hour is the extent of my knowledge. I think it's even the extent of *his* knowledge, if only because he's horrible at keeping secrets from me." She snorted. "No, really. I can probably guess my next three Christmas presents."

"And you expect me to believe that Natasha didn't give Mister Muscles the name and address of who he needs to murder?" she retorted.

"Yes," Phil answered. He considered pinching the bridge of his nose to escape Carol's skeptical expression. "I don't think she wants 'Mister Muscles'—or anyone else, for that matter—to hurt this guy. I think it's deeper than being tossed out of bed after a fling."

For some reason, Carol's face softened at that. He watched as her grip on her arms loosened and her shoulders lost their hard, serious line. "I was a little afraid that'd be your answer."

"Really?" Try as he might, Phil couldn't keep the hint of surprise out of his voice. "I didn't think you and Natasha were that close. For you to be that invested in—"

"I'm not *invested* in her," Carol interrupted, shaking her head. "It's not like you and Bicep Bulge over there, playing happy families while the rest of us are arguing down the phone with our senile grandparents. It's just—" She paused and ran a hand through her hair. "You meet people who have dark, comic book hero pasts or whatever, and when they start coming out of that, you cheer for them a little. I did it with Jessica, though god knows she still likes to pull out the Meredith Grey 'dark and twisty' card."

Phil cracked a tiny smile. "I thought Cristina was the dark and twisty one."

"For my sanity, I'm going to pretend you didn't just name a character on a glorified soap opera," she returned, and he laughed. "My point," she continued after a little shake of her head, "is that the Natasha who used to slink around here is long gone, and I like the one who took her place. And now that the slinky one is back, somebody needs to die."

Phil glanced momentarily at his coffee. "To be fair, it usually takes two people for a relationship to blow apart."

“Oh, I know.” Carol knocked her fist against the circulation desk before stepping away from it. “But slinky or not, Natasha Romanoff scares the shit out of me, so I’d rather be mad at the other guy.”

Bucky used the top of the vodka bottle to tap on the door to Natasha’s condo, but to no avail. It was Tuesday, four days after she’d torn him a new one—not exactly how he’d planned for his evening to go. Once things were settled between the two of them, he was going to have to express his extreme sadness and frustration at her cockblocking escapade.

He rapped the neck of the bottle against the door once more. “I fucking know you’re in there,” he called out. Unfortunately his words timed perfectly with the old woman across the hall exiting her home to walk her dog. She shot Bucky a look for his foul language and he gave her an apologetic grimace. He waited until she was out of hearing range before knocking on the door again. “C’mon, Nat, open up.”

The door pulled open as far as the chain lock allowed. “What do you want?”

“To fix this,” he answered. He held up the bottle of vodka for her to inspect. “And we both know the only way you or I are going to talk about our feelings is if booze is involved, so let’s just get this over with.”

She arched an eyebrow in his direction. “Drinking something that potent on a school night, James? Not sure how well that’s going to work out for you.”

“I brought a change of clothes for the morning. If you won’t let me crash on your couch, I’ll call Steve to come pick me up and take my drunk ass back to his place.”

Natasha studied him closely for a full minute before sighing and letting him in. Bucky dropped off his bag near Nat’s couch and seated himself at her dining room table while she grabbed shot glasses. “Drink the truth?” she asked.

“Nope. Tonight we’re just going to talk.”

She looked at him with one of her many unreadable and therefore terrifying expressions before giving a small shrug and taking her place across the table from him. He poured two shots and they both threw them back with ease before staring each other down. “So are you...” she started.

“Yes,” Bucky answered.

“Yes what?”

“I do treat you like a sister. But that’s what you are. Just as much as Tammy or any of the other girls. So, yeah, I’m going to overstep my bounds and butt my nose in because that’s what brothers do.”

She traced the rim of her shot glass with her fingers while looking at him. “Don’t you have about five hundred stories where you needed your sisters to save your ass?”

He smiled. “I never said they were the ones who needed protection, just that I offer my services whether it’s needed or not.” He gently kicked her foot under the table. “You okay?”

She started her response by grabbing the bottle of vodka from in front of him and pouring herself a shot, which she downed with a scary calm. He raised his eyebrows at her in a silent judgment. “Just because you can’t handle your liquor doesn’t mean I have to take it easy,” she informed him. She

went back to tracing the rim of her shot glass with her finger as she tried to summon an answer. “I guess not,” she admitted quietly.

“No kidding.”

It was her turn to give a kick under the table. “I don’t know what to do. I never been dumped before.”

“Well, take it from a professional, life moves on.” He watched something flicker over her face, an emotion that would go unnoticed by almost anyone else. “But you don’t want life to move on?” Taking another shot was her only other answer and part of him wondered if she was playing Drink the Truth simply out of habit. He ran his fingers through his hair with a sigh. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“When you told me it was Bruce, I didn’t believe you, and I’m sorry.”

Natasha shrugged. “We’re not the most likely of couples, not that we were ever really a couple.”

“I think you qualified.” He paused to pour himself another drink, slung it back, and took a moment to appreciate the heat glowing in his stomach. “It was nice to see you happy, well as happy as you ever get.” He laughed when she flipped him off.

“Nice to see you’re happy too, even if it is completely nauseating.”

“Uh-uh,” he warned as he twirled a finger at her face. “We’re talking about you right now, no deflecting. So what do you want to do now? Bang another guy and get Bruce out of your system? Buy a bunch of cats and become a crazy cat lady?”

“Punch you in the throat until you offer better suggestions?” She sighed as she sat back in her chair and drew her knees up to her chest. “I just want it to stop hurting. I feel like an idiot.”

“Trust me, you are not the dumb one in this situation.”

“Don’t do that,” she warned. “You don’t know his whole story.”

Her words caused Bucky to flash back to his confrontation with Bruce in the parking lot and how he’d seen a dark look of loss and hardship in the other man’s eyes. It was the same sadness he’d seen in Natasha’s face more times than he was comfortable with. “Still doesn’t mean that he gets to hurt you.” Her eyes ducked down so he reached over and flicked her in the arm. “I’m not kidding, Tasha. I know you expect gloom and doom in all your relationships because life has majorly screwed you over, but that’s not really how it’s supposed to work.”

She poured herself another shot and offered to refill his glass but he waved her off. “So tell me how it should work, if you’re done lecturing me. How are things going with tall, blond, and artsy?”

“They’d be going a lot better if some crazy psychopath hadn’t interrupted us Friday night.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “I figured you’d two would just go back at it.”

“No much ‘back’ to go at,” he muttered.

“Seriously? You still haven’t hit that?”

He sighed and went ahead and poured himself another shot. “We’ve... gotten handsy, but nothing

more. There was going to be more, but then you showed up to tear me a new one. And thanks for not even bothering to apologize for that by the way.”

Natasha shrugged. “What happened after I left?”

“We cuddled up in my bed with plans to have some morning fun before he had to drive down to visit his mom for the rest of the weekend, but we ended up oversleeping, and he didn’t want to have to explain to his mom that the reason he was late was because he was too busy with sexy times.”

“That’s disgusting.”

He laughed. His life was pretty saccharine at the moment, and he didn’t even admit that even though Friday night hadn’t gone as planned, it was still the best night of sleep he’d had in a while.

“You want to crash here?” she asked.

“Is that all the relationship talk you can handle?”

“If you’re just going to brag about how great your life is, then yes.”

“Well, then I guess we’re done. You mind if I crash on the couch?”

“I figured you’d want Steve to come and get you.”

He knew his smirk was firmly in the shit-eating category, but couldn’t find himself to care. “When it comes to words like ‘Steve’ and ‘come’, I have a feeling my life is going to become like a Pringles can—once I pop, I’m not going to want to stop.” He laughed for a full minute at her groan of disgust.

“So, uh, okay, here’s the thing,” Wade Wilson said, and Steve glanced up from where he was packing pastels back into the art closet to look over at him. He was wearing a rumpled button-down and a tie with musical notes on it, a sure sign he’d covered for May Parker while she spent the afternoon at a “set-in-stone appointment” that was probably with her hairdresser. Steve liked Wade. He trended toward way too enthusiastic, sure, but somewhere under the insanity laid a good heart.

But Steve also liked leaving work in time to catch an early Wednesday night movie with Bucky, which meant he needed to finish switching out the art supplies. “Darcy said that you can leave the timesheet in the basket on her desk, and she’ll approve it when she gets back,” he explained.

Wade blinked. “What?”

“Darcy. The substitute timesheets. She had a thing, I thought—” Wade kept staring at him, so Steve sighed and put his hands on his hips. “You’re not here about your timesheet?”

“Uh, no. Why would I be here about my timesheet? I never fill out a timesheet when I’m here, I just wait until Darcy e-mails me about it, and then she offers to do it as long as I come in and sign it, and then I get to breathe in her coffee-flavored hair for a couple minutes when I make a special trip to scribble my John Hancock on the dotted line.” Wade paused for breath, then frowned. “She had a thing?”

“I guess,” Steve replied, shrugging. “She didn’t really say.”

“She never really says. It’s part of her allure.” Steve was fairly certain that the sound Wade released qualified as a dreamy sigh. He stood there for a few seconds, watching first as Wade scratched his ear and then as he picked at hangnail. When he cleared his throat, Wade jumped a foot off the floor like a spooked animal. “God, you are hot but also creepy,” he decided.

“I thought you needed something?” Steve prompted. He tried very hard not to glance at the clock.

“I did? I— Oh, no, I didn’t need something,” Wade responded. He waved a hand, almost as though he planned on clearing the air between them. “No, I wanted to tell you something. Really, I wanted to tell anyone something, but it was you or Barnes, and Barnes still kind of scares me, so by process of elimination—”

“Wade.”

“Right!” Wade announced, effectively cutting himself off. He dropped his hands to his sides.

“Here’s the thing: I don’t know a ton about, like, staff dynamics, and how different teachers play off one another. I don’t think I ever will. But trust me when I say that this place is getting *weird*.”

Steve frowned. “Weird?” he repeated.

“Uh, *yeah*. Banner’s extra-grumpy, Stark’s extra-scary, there’re freaking *waves* of unresolved sexual tension rolling off you and Barnes—” Steve nearly choked on air. “—and I am pretty sure Romanoff went from ‘getting laid and liking it’ to ‘has never known a man’s loving touch.’” Wade threw up his hands. “What gives? Because you are all harshing my mellow. Like, *bad*.”

“I’m going to harsh your mellow worse if you make us late for our movie.” Wade nearly leapt out of his clothes when he realized Bucky was standing behind him, his shoulder propped against the doorjamb. Bucky cracked a grin at his wide-eyed gaping. “Darcy says to leave your timesheet in the—”

“Basket, yeah, I know, but coffee-flavored hair comes first.” Bucky’s brow crumpled in confusion, but Wade ignored it to point back at Steve. “This is the UST I mean, you know,” he declared, flapping his hand vaguely in Bucky’s direction.

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “I’ll work on it,” he promised, and watched as Wade beat a hasty retreat to whatever corner of the earth he actually came from.

It was a few seconds and three boxes of pastels later that Bucky lightly bumped Steve with his hip. Steve smiled and bumped him back as he finally closed the supply cabinet. “Do I even want to know what Wilson’s problem is today?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

Steve grinned. “Apparently, this place has gone to the dogs because you and I have unresolved sexual tension.” He paused. “Well, something like that, at any rate.”

Bucky snorted. “It’s only unresolved because of the Russians,” he muttered.

Steve laughed. “I knew we got into the cold war for a reason,” he decided, and if he was extra-handsy while steering Bucky out of the way so he could collect his bag, it was just because of the unresolved sexual tension.

Come Together

“This is awful,” Tony complained. The frat boys next to him who’d jumped up five minutes ago to scream-cheer about something, sent him dirty looks. He rolled his eyes. “Seriously, how do you even own season tickets to something like this? Are you a pod person? That’s gotta be the reason, because nothing else explains why an intelligent, former officer in the armed forces would let himself be sloshed with beer for a couple hours.”

Next to him, retired Lieutenant Colonel (and current social worker) James Rhodes heaved a sigh. “You know that not everyone on the planet thinks like you do, right?”

“Maybe they don’t, but they *should*.”

Rhodey glanced over at him. “Tony, I remember a day not long ago where your idea of a fun night involved computerized specifications and a six-pack of Redbull.”

“Uh, yeah,” Tony retorted. He gestured with his mostly-empty plastic cup of soda. He’d tried to flag down the beer-bellied man carrying around the fresh drinks, but then one of the teams’d scored and chaos erupted all over the place. “I remember those days, too. And then, I grew up.”

“You mean you quit your job, wandered around aimlessly for a while, and happened to somehow find the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Bruce says it’s called growing up,” Tony returned, lucky that the snotty note in the back of his tone was covered by a new outburst of intense, insane cheering.

Tony’d never understood basketball. He had a healthy respect for sports that involved technology and talent: Formula One racing, mixed martial arts, really complicated forms of dance that involved people twisting their limbs in ways limbs were never intended to twist. Running back and forth along a hardwood floor, bouncing a ball and throwing it at a metal circle made absolutely no sense to him.

But Rhodey loved that kind of shit. College level, professional level— Hell, he’d even coached one of the junior high teams in town after their original coach headed off to rehab for a semester. He lived for basketball, followed it with a religious fervor usually reserved for Clint Barton and his college football.

Which explained why Rhodey’d voluntarily choose to watch the red-and-black team destroy the black-and-red team. What it *didn’t* explain was—

“Why’d you invite me?” Tony asked once some buzzer rang and the teams trotted back to their benches to talk in hushed, serious tones. Rhodey glanced over at him, frowning. “You have season tickets, fine. But you’ve always had season tickets. Pretty sure that this is the first time you brought me to this sweaty hazing ritual.”

Rhodey sighed. “This is *fun*, Tony.”

“No. This is a form of torture, created by frat boys to punish nerds,” Tony retorted. Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Guys like me break out in spontaneous cases of the hives when we see round, orange balls. If it’s bad enough in high school, it even transfers to pumpkins.”

Rhodey snorted at him and swigged his beer. Somehow, his too-foamy, lukewarm beverage had lasted a lot longer than Tony’s own. “I’d be shocked if you ever attended a gym class back when

you were in school,” he said. Tony nodded to concede the point. “And, just for the record, I invited you because you’re my friend.”

Tony stopped in his mission to polish off the last swallow his soda to stare at Rhodey. “Really?” he asked. “That’s the best you’ve got?”

“How is acknowledgment that we’re friends a disappointment to you?”

“Because it’s a cop-out.” Rhodey sighed at him, and Tony jabbed an elbow into his side. “No, see, I know how this works. You pay me compliments when you want to distract me. Like you think that I’ll, I don’t know, I’ll bask in the glory of my own excellence if you just remind me of it.”

“Yeah, because that’s unlikely,” Rhodey muttered.

“Which means you didn’t just invite me to the game to stoke the flames of our already-excellent friendship. Which means—” One of the referees blew his whistle, and Tony nearly fell out of his seat. “James Rhodes, did you ask a *woman* to this basketball game?”

Rhodey shot him a tight look. “Shut up, Tony.”

He raised his hand for the beer man to come over, too, but Tony smacked it out of the way. “Holy crap. You asked a woman to come to this testosterone-filled grunt-fest, and she shot you down.”

Rhodey’s face tightened even further. “How’s your man-spat with Doctor Banner going, by the way?”

“One, we’re just fine now, and two, don’t change the subject.” The beer guy started handing out cups to a clump of loud college-aged guys two rows away, so Tony leaned in closer to Rhodey and lowered his voice. “You know, there’s still that gal I work with if you’re looking for someone to ease your lonely—”

“I’m not lonely enough to date someone *you* set me up with, thank you,” Rhodey snapped. Tony leaned back a couple inches, a little surprised by the venom in the back of his voice, and he shook his head. “There was a woman at the gym,” he explained after a couple seconds, his arm again rising to flag down the beer guy. “We had coffee a couple times, and I thought she might want to go to the game. She didn’t.”

Tony grimaced. “Shot you down like a suspicious-looking plane in restricted airspace?” When the guy raised his eyebrows, Tony shrugged. “Armed forces lingo. I’m knowing my audience or whatever.”

“It didn’t go well,” Rhodey confirmed. He bought a couple beers off the beer delivery guy, paying him between uproarious cheers as the home team scored more baskets. The away team, Tony gathered, was about as proficient as a bunch of toddlers in fancy shoes. He accepted a soda off his friend and took a healthy swallow. “Besides,” Rhodey added after a couple seconds, “you bought me that outrageous ticket to the comedy show for Christmas. I thought this might help repay you.”

Tony choked on his swallow of soda. Rhodey narrowed his eyes, immediately suspicious, and Tony went about the business of clearing his throat and trying to look innocent. He thought he was maybe mildly successful. “Yeah, right, repayment,” he said, turning his cup around in his hand. “For the ticket.”

“Tony, what did you do?” Rhodey demanded.

“Do?” Tony replied. “I didn’t *do* anything. I’m just thinking that if you thought subjecting me to

beer-scented mouth-breathers was repayment, I should maybe buy you coal next year.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Huge lumps of coal. *Enormous*.” And when Rhodey laughed, Tony knew for a fact that he was, miraculously, off the hook.

Darcy felt a thrill at the sight of the paper cup emitting a trail of heavenly-scented steam appearing out of thin air on her desk. The bliss quickly faded when she looked up and saw the stony expression on Loki’s face.

“We need to talk.”

She made a sweeping motion with her arms to encompass her territory in the school office. “I’m a wee bit busy. Yes, the morning rush to call in for late students—and with the plague going around, there were plenty of those—has passed, but I’ve got morning announcements in a few minutes and ain’t nobody getting between me and my—“

“You told my brother,” Loki hissed.

Darcy crossed her arms under her chest and did not miss at all how Loki’s green eyes flickered down to watch the show. “One: interrupting is rude. Two: I haven’t talked to your behemoth of a brother in days, so I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Loki leaned in further across the counter. “You told him about *us*.”

Darcy caught a passing Sitwell hitch in his steps, and she bit her tongue so as not to mutter a *sonuva bitch*. Because despite the assistant principal’s claim not to get involved in staff gossip, if he was the first to catch a whiff of something juicy, he’d taunt it over the heads of people with big mouths. And bigger arms. And a love of purple pens.

“There is no *us*,” she hissed back. “And I definitely haven’t talked to Thor.”

“Then why did he put Alva on speakerphone with me last night to discuss me kissing my girlfriend, Miss Darcy?”

“Lewis!” a voice shouted behind her. “You going to do the announcements anytime soon or am I going to have to do them for you?”

She turned to shoot a look at Principal Fury. “People around here need you doing the announcements like they need a hole in—“ Her words faltered as her gaze fell on his eye patch. Today was not her morning. “I’ll get right on that, sir.” He spun with a huff before closing himself off in his office once more.

Just as she was about to wave Loki off for a moment to complete her most cherished duty, the office door flung open and Wade Wilson’s loud greeting of “Darcella!” filled the air. Today he sported a red and black tracksuit; she really hoped Natasha was out today and not someone like cranky Mrs. Howard. The old coot would probably keel over at the thought of someone wearing that outfit while covering her class. Then again, maybe it wasn’t a bad idea...

“Hey,” Wade continued as he came to stand next to Loki. “I was going to see if you wanted me to get you a cup of joe from the teacher’s lounge, but I see someone already brought you real coffee.” He paused to eye Loki up and down before giving a little head nod. “Bro.”

Loki's eyebrows shot up in the air, and he looked at Darcy in obvious disbelief that someone like Wade Wilson was hanging around school children. She'd seen that look enough to easily recognize it. "Wade, Loki. Loki, Wade. Now if you gentlemen will excuse me..." She proceeded to recite the morning announcements with her usual flourish before turning her attention back to the two men who were busy with eyeing each other and displaying traditional male posturing commonly seen in peacocks.

"Wade," she ordered, "I'll do your timecard at the end of the day. For now, get to the gym before Cage's class shows up. You don't want to leave the preggo waiting."

He looked like he wanted to say something in reply, but instead just gave a little head nod and bolted from the office.

Which left Loki.

"There is no us," she repeated.

"I am aware, which is why I was shocked to hear my niece's question." He paused to run his fingers through his black hair. Like Thor, he wore it long, but it didn't look nearly as good as his brother's blond tresses. Seriously, men were not supposed to get hotter the longer their hair grew. It was one of several laws of the universe that Thor defied.

Loki sighed as he tried to recollect himself. "I did not mean to sound short. It's the beginning of the semester, and the first couple of weeks are always an exercise in insanity."

Darcy shrugged as she took a sip of her coffee. Impressively, he'd remembered her order from the afternoon coffee non-date date. "I went through college. I remember what this time of the year is."

"My urgency is for your protection," Loki continued to explain. "My brother, though I love him so, has a nasty habit of sticking his nose in places where it does not belong. I was attempting to be as discrete as possible with your identity—even though, as you said, there is no 'us'—as much for your sake as my own. Once Thor gets the idea of how he thinks he can aid in the betterment of someone's life, it is difficult for him to shake that notion. Especially when I am involved."

"He hasn't talked to me," Darcy repeated.

Loki looked at her with near-pity. "It will come. Trust me." She caught the faintest hint of a sheepish grin on his face as he dug his phone out of his dark green pea coat pocket. "I also wanted to thank you for the new phone background." He turned the device so she could see the screen, which displayed one of the images of Alva sitting in her lap and the two of them duck-facing for a selfie. "Although I assure you, the picture was selected to show off my beautiful niece, not because of your presence. But," he added with a slight hesitation, "if you would like to join me on Wednesday night for dinner, there's a new café that's opened near campus, and I do not enjoy dining alone."

"Are you paying?"

He smiled at the question. "You do recall that I am a graduate student, and therefore poor. And, as you keep pointing out, we are not a couple."

"I live in my parents' basement; you're totally more of an adult than I am, and should therefore take pity on me and buy me dinner."

He shook his head slightly with a quiet chuckle. "With an argument like that, how could I say no?"

"I don't like Mister Wilson," Tomas pouted after gym time, and Bruce jerked his head up from where he was helping the kids split up into their penmanship practice groups. He only realized he'd blurted *excuse me* when Tomas sighed and plopped down in his chair. "He's weird, and I don't like him," he repeated.

"No, I mean— Well, first, what's the rule about when we talk about teachers and other adults?" Bruce asked.

Tomas kicked the leg of the table, but Abby immediately piped up, "Respect!"

"Exactly." Bruce stepped in front of Sam before he went to try and hide, which was his weird knee-jerk reaction to penmanship. Bruce and the special education teachers were working on trying to figure out why he wrote so many letters backwards as soon as you removed the dotted-line guides. Sam huffed and trotted back to his table. "Even if Mister Wilson isn't your favorite teacher, you need to respect him."

Tomas heaved a sigh. "Fine."

"Now, why are we talking about Mister Wilson?"

"Because he's in the gym!" Tomas's brother Antonio chimed in from the next table over. He reached for a thick marker until Bruce raised an eyebrow, and then traded it for a pencil. "We saw him on our way back from Miss Potts's office."

"It's just Potts, not Potts's, dummy," Tomas sneered.

"*You're* the dumb one, dumb-head!"

"No, you're—"

"*Boys*," Bruce warned sharply. He tried to never raise his voice with the kindergarteners, and he almost always succeeded (aside from the one time one of the boys darted out into the parking lot as they were coming in from recess because he thought he saw a dog). Instead, he leaned heavily into words and implied that yelling might follow. It worked wonders; Antonio and Tomas both cast their eyes down at their tables and muttered quiet apologies to each other. He forced a little smile at them. "I'm sure Mister Wilson is here to teach a class, which is his job. If you see him today, what will you be?"

"Respectful!" Abby announced.

Bruce bit down on the corners of a little smile. "I was asking your classmates."

"Respectful," the twins muttered, and Bruce thanked them before moving onto the next group of students.

He tried to keep his mind clear as he moved around the classroom, steering pencils back in the right direction and helping encourage proper identification of today's independent writing words ("No, Helen, that's a cat, not a fox"), but his mind wandered back to the knowledge that Wade Wilson happened to be in the gym. It wasn't unusual for Wade to substitute at their school—he usually covered a class every ten days, give or take—but it *was* unusual for anyone besides Natasha Romanoff to be in the gym. Bruce couldn't remember the last time Natasha'd missed a day of school; once, she'd been rear-ended a mile away but came in as soon as the police released them from the scene of the accident.

Not, of course, that Bruce had any right to think too long or hard about Natasha. Other than the text

messages after Bucky'd told him off at happy hour, they'd not spoken. The rift was so deep and wide that Tony'd taken to sending him unsubtle e-mails with messages such as *carpe diem already* and the complete lyrics to "Kiss the Girl" from *The Little Mermaid*. He counted himself lucky that Tony'd caught the January plague and was laid up in bed instead of encouraging him to investigate Natasha's possible absence.

Bruce shoved away any worry through reading time and their daily discussion of the weather. He'd almost forgotten about the whole thing until he went to take the kids down for gym class and discovered that a track-suit wearing Wade Wilson was unfurling the parachute in the middle of the gym floor.

Bruce's class, predictably, lost their collective minds. Wade stared at them, horrified, and Bruce tried to smile as he watched his sometimes-colleague try to organize a gaggle of elated five-year-olds.

Then, once the shrieking was down to a dull roar, he walked down the hall to the men's room and pulled out his cell phone.

Do you have any idea why Natasha's out?

Tony Stark, Master of the Universe: *does she have the plague? because I have the plague.*

Bruce sighed when he realized that, once again, Tony'd changed his name in Bruce's address book. *You have a cold, Tony*, he replied for what felt like the thirtieth time since Tony'd started sniffing Tuesday afternoon.

Tony Stark, Master of the Universe: *no. a cold is sniffles and a cough. This is fever, nausea, misery, and eventual death. the reaper is coming for me.*

Bruce rolled his eyes and attempted to open up the screen of other text conversations, but a new message from Tony popped up and overtook the screen. *I'll leave you my porn*, it read.

Your porn?

Tony Stark, Master of the Universe: *someone should enjoy it in my absence. you will also have to comfort pepper through those lonely nights.*

Bruce shook his head. *I am not dignifying that with a response*, he decided, switching back to the other screen.

Tony once again replied too fast. *as long as you dignify my wife with your dick when I am gone, that is all I need.*

Bruce groaned, closed out of the conversation with Tony, and scrolled around until he found Natasha's name. He'd considered deleting her from his phone book, or at least leaving her information as just an anonymous number, but it'd felt juvenile. They'd stopped sleeping together, no amateur dramatics required.

She'd also not texted him anything since their conversation about Bucky over a week ago.

Bruce sighed and shoved his cell phone back in his pocket.

He tried to focus on the school day from that point on, managing tiny personalities and trying to keep the boys from climbing the walls when they were informed it was too cold for recess, but his mind kept wandering. Loss, he'd discovered years earlier, turned your brain into your worst

enemy; where you never used to worry, you started to imagine doomsday scenarios and certain death. Bruce remembered the night of Betty's accident, his impatient eyes darting to the clock as he waited for her to return home. He'd told himself then that she'd probably just gotten caught in traffic or stopped off at the store, innocuous answers that'd turned into lies when the phone finally rang. He imagined Natasha in another minor car accident, then a major one; he imagined her ill, or hurt, or both.

And then, he imagined her at another school, dressed in a business suit and interviewing for another position, and his stomach twisted itself into knots.

He survived his afternoon class and another run-in with Wade Wilson without pulling out his phone again, but his mind never slowed down. He considered talking to Bucky at one point, but what exactly would he say? Worse, how would he reasonably explain his concern after the argument in the parking lot?

He felt bad enough for losing his temper and snapping at Bucky. He'd feel worse if Bucky turned his worry into something ugly.

Or if Bucky'd encouraged her to skip the day of work. To pamper herself on a mental health day, or to find a new job somewhere without Bruce.

The guy who cut and run because he was scared, and who hurt her while trying to protect them both.

After the student cleared out for the day, he pulled out his phone and opened up the text conversation under Natasha's name. The last line was the one about a little bird telling him he'd hurt her—and nothing else.

He thumbed open a new message. *I hope everything's all right*, he wrote, the lump in his throat threatening to choke him. *Maybe when you're back at school, we can talk.*

He sent the message and then stared at his phone, waiting for a response. When ten minutes went by and his screen remained blank, he abandoned it on his desk to set up for the next day.

A half-hour later, he was digging through the bottom of his supply cabinet when he heard a light knock at the door. He nearly slammed his head on a shelf as he jerked around to find Bucky standing in the doorway. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up and his hands shoved in his pockets, and he looked thoroughly guilty.

Bruce felt his stomach lurch. "Can I help you?"

"I just wanted to say that I was maybe a dick to you when we were all at Xavier's." When Bruce blinked in surprise, Bucky reached up and scratched the side of his neck. "And I wanted to apologize sooner, but I thought maybe it'd be better for everybody if I let it all cool down." He forced a little smile. "I have blinders when it comes to Nat."

Bruce swallowed and forced himself to nod. "You care about her."

"I have a hard time admitting that I'm not the only one who does," Bucky replied with a shrug. "But anyway, she texted me on her lunch break today and I realized I hadn't come in here to say I'm sorry, so—"

"Lunch break?"

The sound of Bruce's voice clearly surprised them both, because Bucky immediately frowned at

him. He tried to force a sheepish smile, but he felt it falter. “Yeah, at jury duty. She told us about it three or four staff meetings ago. She sat there all day and only found out ten minutes ago that she’s free to go. I’m surprised we haven’t heard about a redheaded crazy woman burning the courthouse to the ground.”

He kept talking after that, something about when he last got called for jury duty, but Bruce was reaching into his pocket for his cell phone. He remembered too late that he’d left it on his desk, and immediately rocketed up to collect it. He wondered how he looked to Bucky; he’d gone from completely engaged in the conversation to distracted and flighty a half-second later, and all without an explanation.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked once Bruce’d rounded his desk and swiped to unlock his phone.

The message waiting for him simply read, *I’d like that.*

“Yeah,” Bruce said. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. “Yeah, sorry, I’m fine.”

Pepper looked around her quiet and immaculately clean office. Her eyes searched for something, anything, requiring her attention, but there was nothing left. With a heavy sigh, she donned her overcoat and wrapped her cashmere scarf around her neck before bracing herself to head home.

It wasn’t the painfully frigid temperatures or the snowy roads that caused her procrastinate in leaving the school building; it was her bed-ridden husband. His adjective of choice, not hers. Because if he were actually bed-ridden, then he wouldn’t be able to amble from room to room in their house with illness-induced ADD leaving a trail of snotty tissues everywhere he went. She loved Tony deeply, but when he was sick, she seriously contemplated divorce at least three times a day.

Pepper didn’t even bother texting to see if he wanted her to bring something specific home for dinner, because his answer would change seven times before she even made it out of the school parking lot. Instead she elected to stop at a bistro and order a bowl of each of the available flavors of soup to give as an offering.

Tony, without fail, fell ill every school year. He never had any sick days by the time May rolled around, and they were always used for legitimate health reasons. He wasn’t one to need a “mental health day” on the same afternoon as the annual outlet mall blowout sale like some of the staff members. Of course, that would also require Tony to be willing to shop at an outlet mall.

She braced herself before walking into the house through the garage and barely had one foot inside the kitchen before hearing a pathetic moan coming over the intercom.

She hated the intercom.

Why Tony had installed one into the house years ago she didn’t understand. He said something about having one in his house when he was little and sneaking conversations to the butler. While there may have been some truth in that statement, she was willing to bet it had more to do with him having insomnia one night and wanting to play with wires.

“Pepper? Is that you?” he got out before sneezing three times.

She sighed wearily before pressing the button to talk. “No. It’s a thief. I’ve come to rob you.”

“I’m not in the mood to be sassed,” he shot back, his cracking voice evidence of how much coughing he’d done while she was at work.

“I’ll be up in two minutes. You want food now or later?”

“Is it a Stromboli? I’d eat a Stromboli. Or mashed potatoes. Maybe some of those crepes from the bakery on Main. Or how about—“

“It’s soup!” she shouted toward the stairs since the intercom wouldn’t let her interrupt him.

“Oh,” he half-whined. “No thanks.”

She rolled her eyes and set the food in the fridge for later. Pulling her heels off, she padded out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the bedroom. When she opened the door, she could only sigh and shake her head. Tony was in bed wearing at least two sweatshirts and a scarf around his head, but only boxer shorts on the lower half of his body.

“My head is freezing, my feet are on fire, don’t judge,” he explained with half-opened eyes. “But, hey, pretty easy access if you want to have a go at it. You’ll have to be on top; I don’t have much energy for thrusting.”

“Yeah, because there’s nothing sexier than you sneezing and coughing on me the whole time, and me having to do all the work,” she shot back as she stripped out of her skirt and blouse. Grabbing one of Tony’s old band tour t-shirts and a pair of yoga pants, she redressed and crawled into bed. Her husband immediately rolled her direction and wrapped himself around her body. She rearranged him until she was sitting up against the headboard and his head was in her lap. “How are you feeling?” she asked while running fingers through his greasy hair.

“I might escape death’s clutches. This time.”

“When was the last time you took something?”

“I don’t know. *Price is Right* was on.”

Pepper reached over him to grab the bottle of aspirin and the fullest of the four water bottles on his nightstand. “Here,” she ordered as she handed him pills.

“How are you not sick?” he asked for the seven hundredth time that week once he’d swallowed and sneezed. “Is this because you grew up around pigs? Does that make you immune to the swine flu?”

“You don’t have swine flu, Tony.”

“Well, you are the pig expert. Ow!” he whined while rubbing his hip. “No pinching your sick husband—in sickness and health and all that. You promised.”

“Sorry,” she apologized softly while going back to running fingers through his hair.

“Will actually sleep in the bed with me tonight?” His tone of voice was eerily similar to the small, nervous children she counseled at school.

She felt guilty for abandoning him, but he was impossible to sleep around when he was sick. “I’ll try, but I can’t have you keeping me up all night with coughing?”

“This is all Rhodey’s fault,” he grumbled yet again.

“You work in a petri dish of small, snotty children, and you’re going to blame Rhodey?”

“He took me to a basketball game. My kind doesn’t belong there and this is my punishment.” Pepper chuckled quietly at his reasoning. “Hey, was Nat there today?”

“I didn’t see her, and I think I heard something about Wade being there and wearing a tracksuit. Why?”

“I thought I remembered Bruce texting me a few hours ago about her, but it’s entirely possible that was a fever dream. I also vaguely remember doing some online shopping, so apologies in advance if something large or weird shows up on our doorstep in the next couple days.”

She shook her head. The last time Tony was sick—Demon Pox was the nickname for the last illness, even though neither demons nor poxes were involved—he’d ordered a case of every specialty flavor Pringles had to offer.

In Europe.

Bruce stood at the door and knocked. Natasha’d agreed to meet with him the following day for their talk, but she wasn’t answering her door. He’d been standing outside it for five minutes and nothing. Endless doubts about this whole thing nestled and grew in his stomach—was this a trick, had she changed her mind, should he just leave? He was about to walk away when he heard the front entrance for the cluster of condos swing open and Natasha muttering Russian curses under her breath.

A greeting lodged in Bruce’s throat as he turned to watch her enter the lobby. She was in running clothes and her cheeks were flush from the combination of the exertion and the bitterly cold January air, but something was off. Her blue eyes were wide and darting around and her breathing was faster than normal. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Natasha gave a curt shake of the head as her only answer and set about trying to unlock her front door, but her hands were trembling too badly, and the keys slipped from her fingers. It was the only time Bruce’s reflexes were faster than hers, and that did nothing to quell his anxiety. He snagged the keys from the ground and unlocked the door for her, waving her inside before following suit and throwing the deadlock behind them. “Natasha?” he asked quietly.

She didn’t say anything, just sat in the middle of the living room floor to stretch. He watched her, but didn’t move from his spot and didn’t bother to take his coat off. He’d wait on her permission before he moved any further into her home. He kept his eyes on his shoes because everywhere he looked he saw memories. Not necessarily steamy nights they’d snuck in on occasion in the last seven months, but memories of their five-year long friendship—spices for recipes only they were brave enough to try, books they’d exchanged, a pair of his socks she’d swiped two years ago from his home while complaining about cold feet during a movie night—and it stung.

“A dog came after me. A big one,” she finally offered as an answer. “Chased me for a good half-mile, and made me take a longer route than necessary to get back here. Sorry I was late.”

His eyes shot up and he began to look for ripped clothes or open wounds. “You okay?” he asked. His body wanted to lurch forward and offer any kind of comfort she’d take, but her eyes were still too wild for him to feel comfortable invading her personal space.

She nodded. “Will be. You wanted to talk?”

“Go shower first. I can come back in a bit if you need it.”

“I’m fine,” she replied with a hard edge on her voice.

“No, you’re not,” he corrected gently. “And that’s okay.”

She swallowed and turned her gaze to the beige carpet. “It was a recurring nightmare I had as a kid. Hell, I still have it sometimes. Some giant thing chasing me around, and I can’t ever find a safe spot because anywhere I hide, it would track me down and rip walls apart to get to me.” Natasha unknotted her shoelaces as quickly as she could with her still unsteady fingers. She bit her bottom lip while performing the task, and Bruce recognized her tell of being unsure whether to confess more secrets or to run away before things grew even more personal. “I’m just exhausted with things coming out of nowhere only to scare the shit out of me.”

He flinched at the words. Never was it his intention to cause her harm or scare her, and he felt a sudden resolution to right his wrongs, or at least try to. Slowly, he took off his coat and draped it over the back of the armchair to his right. He moved further into the living room and eased himself down beside her. He faced her instead of sitting with their hips flush and both staring at the kitchen, and he found himself fighting the urge not to rest a hand on her knee. Instead he followed the advice he’d constantly given his students and kept his hands in his lap and was overcome with understanding on how disappointed they all looked when given that instruction. Because if his hand went to her knee, it would only be a matter of time before it slid up her thigh in an attempt to physically drive the worry and pain from her face.

But that couldn’t happen right now, because those habits led them to two weeks of avoiding eye contact and dodging each other at all possible costs, and his heart couldn’t sustain that anymore.

“If it makes you feel any better,” he started, “you weren’t the only one who was scared by all of this. I was so terrified that I took my best friend’s advice of ‘be honest with your feelings’ to mean ‘get rid of the best thing that’s happened to you in years.’” She froze at his words as she was halfway through removing her shoes. “I’m not kidding. You’re... You’re the only one who understands what life is like for me. Tony can come close, but...”

“You only like me because I know what it’s like to be dealt a shit hand of cards?” she challenged with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” he quickly reassured her. He felt his stomach twist at the accusation. “No, no, no. That’s not what I meant. It’s more that you understand how hard it is to... open yourself to something like this again. Because it’s terrifying.” He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “When you were out yesterday, my mind went insane with one horrible situation after another—you were hurt or interviewing at another school because you needed to get away from me. I thought for sure I was going to have an ulcer before lunch.”

“I told you all months ago that I could have jury duty.”

“I know, it’s just— Well, you’ve seen my classroom. I’m not the most organized person on the planet. I can barely keep track of my own schedule, let alone someone else’s.”

She nodded and turned her attention back to her feet. He waited quietly to see if there was something that she wanted to share, but Natasha remained silent.

“I haven’t started a relationship in... Well, we were barely into the twenty-first century. I’m probably going to have a few missteps—I mean, if you want to give this a shot.” He swallowed nervously as she turned to look at him, and he took a deep breath to release the words he’d practiced for the last twenty-four hours in earnest. “Because I don’t want to go back to what we had before. I want more. I don’t want to just wait for you to text me or give me a look and have one amazing night before waiting for weeks for another. I want to sit next to you when we go to Xavier’s and not stress that you’ll be worried someone will think we’re together. I want to take you out on an actual date. And, as nervous as it makes me feel to try something like this again, I want to give it a try.” He licked his lips anxiously, but she continued to stare. Bruce slipped a hand over

to rest on the carpet underneath her bent knees. It was the closest he allowed himself to touching her. “I know you have no reason to want to be with me. I’m probably too old for you, and definitely not attractive enough, and—“

“And you talk too much,” she said before she further cut him off with a kiss.

He gasped in surprise at the contact but also at the relief. He’d missed this; he’d missed her. It didn’t take long for the kiss to deepen; he pulled her wind-chapped bottom lip between his teeth and brushed his tongue against it. He felt his stomach flip-flop—a welcome sensation after all the knot-tying it’d been doing—at the small sound that escaped her.

Natasha broke away a couple minutes later. “I have two stipulations.”

“Anything,” he breathed.

“One—I’m only allowed to do the dumping from now on.” He chuckled at the rule and nodded. “Two—absolutely no more than two double dates per month with Tony Stark.”

“There doesn’t have to be any double dates.”

“We both know that won’t actually happen. Might as well give in to the inevitable.”

“Deal,” he laughed.

He watched her lips purse as she tried to piece together the next thing she wanted to say. “I don’t do romance,” she explained quietly. “Alex and I—he tried to get me there. Five years and...” Her sentence dropped off in a sigh. “It’s just not my thing.”

“I don’t care.” She gave him a dubious look. “Really, I don’t,” he answered. “I want you as you. I don’t care that you aren’t into that kind of thing. I just—“ He paused and closed his eyes. Because maybe taking away his vision and not running the risk of watching her reject him would make saying the next sentence less terrifying.

“I just want to be near you.”

His eyes fluttered open. Natasha’s face, to anyone who didn’t know her, hadn’t changed. But he could see the different emotions warring in her eyes. Something in his favor won out because she leaned over and lingered with a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“I need a shower,” she whispered against his lips. “Join me.”

The thought was enticing, vividly so. He remembered a similar invitation the first night on their Thanksgiving break and memories of the feeling of her soapy skin under his fingers came rushing into his mind. But he shook his head no. He didn’t want to pick up where they’d left off. He wanted a new and improved start.

“Go get cleaned up, I’ll make some lunch.”

She pulled away and he caught a faint hint of surprise at his answer. “If you can cook something using only vodka and carrots, go for it.”

He smiled easily for the first time in what felt like ages. “Maybe I’ll just order a pizza instead.”

“I hope you realize I didn’t ask you to come into the bedroom *just* so we can sleep,” Bucky informed Steve between heady, hard kisses that made him want to climb the other man like a tree.

He'd dragged Steve into the room by his belt buckle, a mistake that led to him getting pinned against the wall. Not that he planned on complaining, but he wanted Steve flat on his bed and naked.

At least, until Steve chuckled against his neck, a dark sound that, when coupled with the curve of his smile, made Bucky's pants feel even tighter. "I think I figured that out," he admitted. His hot breath caused Bucky to raise his chin without thinking. "Aren't you concerned about the Russians?"

Bucky groaned. "Natasha is not a turn-on," he warned. Even though Steve tucked his head further down, Bucky caught the evil spark in his eyes. "Also, she knows we're busy tonight."

"Busy," Steve repeated.

"*Really* busy," Bucky assured him, and when Steve raised his head a couple inches, he seized the other man's mouth and pulled their bodies flush together a second time.

Bucky usually hated the roller-coaster ride up to the first time he went to bed with somebody. He'd spent most of his college career trying to navigate the stupid dance—who bought what supplies, whose extra-long twin bed ended up with dirty sheets, when to leave in the morning—and complaining about it every chance he got. Natasha'd smirked the whole damn time, because she'd had a steady boyfriend and knew that Bucky'd never kick her out of their room.

It hadn't been until senior year that she'd kicked her legs up onto his coffee table, grabbed the bottle of vodka, and announced, "If you don't like the dance, don't dance."

Bucky, who'd slid down off the chair and onto the floor a half-hour earlier, lulled his head back against the end table. "You don't understand how normal relationships work, do you?"

She'd rolled her eyes. "No, but I know how you work. You can use the dance as an excuse to never get too close. If you don't like it, don't do it."

"Somebody needs to buy the condoms."

"Somebody needs to make you so hot that you stock up on condoms way in advance," she'd retorted, and swigged right out of the bottle.

For all of his hating the run-up to the main event, Bucky'd never felt the usual sort of resentment at the whole thing with Steve. Oh, the interruptions drove him crazy—he'd actually created a big district-wide banquet to justify why he absolutely *had* to spend the night with his phone off, Ma—but not in a bad way. Instead of feeling frustrated, he felt like a little kid waiting for the first Fourth of July fireworks.

He grappled with Steve's belt, and Steve exhaled roughly. "If the rest of you is like your hand, I need a flat surface," he warned.

"The rest of me is *so* much better than my hand," Bucky retorted. When he stepped back, he took Steve's belt with him.

The belt landed on the floor, along with Bucky's sweater and then the t-shirt under it. He'd planned on just stripping it all off—quick and to the point—but when he glanced over at Steve, he caught the other guy watching him with these hooded, half-hungry eyes. He slowed down then, not really making it a strip-tease but definitely letting Steve watch.

That was new, too.

Everything with Steve felt new, sometimes, like Bucky was drowning in experiences he never thought he'd have. He wanted to talk to Natasha about it, to ask if she'd felt that way with Alex—because asking about Bruce felt like a suicide mission—but he didn't know how many old wounds it'd open. He just knew that his other relationships, casual and brief like they were, didn't hold a candle to this one.

He dropped his jeans and stood there in his black boxer briefs, middle of the room with the lights on. He wondered if he'd blushed, because the way Steve looked at him set some deep part of his stomach on fire. Worse, it made him want to lose his underwear and take care of business himself.

"Your turn," he decided.

Steve wet his lips. Bucky figured it was nervous, but it looked amazing. "I could watch you stand there for a week," he said.

"The Russians would find us," Bucky warned, and Steve's laughter chased away the little flare of embarrassment that was climbing up his neck.

He tried not to stare while he watched Steve strip, but that was pretty much impossible. He almost sat down on the bed and tucked his hands under his thighs because it was that or come over and help. Steve didn't tease or play around, his eyes trained mostly on places *away* from Bucky—the floor, the wall, Bucky's knees—and the longer it went on, the more Bucky couldn't figure out *why*. Especially since, once Steve's pants hit the floor and he was in his actual underwear, higher thought went out the window.

"Jesus," Bucky muttered, and Steve flared pink. He kept his eyes trained away, though, and it wasn't until Bucky got closer that he realized why. On Steve's chest and upper arms were a collection of small scars. They were faded silver, but Bucky could imagine how they'd looked when they were new, raised and red.

Without thinking, he reached up and ran two fingers over one of the ones high on Steve's chest. He watched Steve flinch involuntarily, and his hand stilled. He tried to think of something clever to say, but words failed. He paused for a moment, then let his fingers trace back over the thin line. "From when you were sick?" he asked after a couple seconds.

Steve let out a long, half-shaky breath. "PICC lines," he murmured. Bucky only realized he was watching his fingers when he raised his head to meet Bucky's eyes. "Not exactly the high school gym class confidence builder."

"High school gym class sucks for everyone."

"Yeah, because I can imagine it sucking for you with your terrifying older sisters and—"

His words disappeared into a hasty, ragged breath when Bucky leaned in and, without any warning, pressed his mouth to the place where his fingers had been. He didn't even think about the gesture as much as he thought about Steve—his nervousness, the years he probably tried to avoid changing in front of people, how hard he'd probably avoided pick-up games of shirts versus skins once he got healthy. Steve froze so completely that Bucky thought maybe he'd screwed up. When he pulled away, though, Steve stared at him for a half-second before crushing their mouths together.

They stumbled to the bed like that, unwilling to break apart for more than hasty breaths and little, involuntary noises until the backs of Bucky's knees hit the mattress and he toppled backward. Steve followed him down, pressing him to the bed sheets and overtaking his mouth again. Their legs tangled, their fingers found each other, and Bucky rolled his hips up into the sweet friction of

skin, thin underwear, and nothing else.

When Steve pulled away, he was red-faced and panting, his lips parted and swollen. Bucky wanted to kiss him again, just from looking at it.

“You going to mock me if I say I want to take our time?” he asked softly.

Bucky grinned. “We still get round two in the morning?”

The red flush crept down Steve’s neck while his eyes darkened. “At least.”

“Then we’re perfect,” Bucky replied, and threaded his fingers through Steve’s hair as he rode the roller coaster up, and up, and up some more.

The Delicate Dance of Relationships

Carol slid into her seat at the comedy club about fifteen minutes before the show started, mentally cursing Tony Stark and his inability to spend a reasonable amount of money on *anything*. Her assigned table was in the very front row, just far enough from center stage that she wouldn't become the butt of any jokes, and the bartender had already informed her that her drinks were covered for the night. She stabbed the lime in her vodka tonic with her little plastic toothpick and wondered how she'd exact her revenge; she couldn't believe that her most annoying colleague had pulled out every stop in the book.

She was just about to send Jessica a text complaining about that exact thing when a man's voice asked, "Excuse me, is this table six?" Carol glanced up to see a tall guy with truly excellent shoulders standing next to her seat, his ticket stub in one hand and a drink in the other.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," she quickly said, and dragged her bag off the second chair. "I didn't realize I was sharing."

"I didn't either," he admitted as he sat down. He wore a button-down shirt with the perfect number of buttons open and the sleeves rolled up. Carol was suddenly grateful for the company—or, at least, for the eye candy. He flashed her a killer smile. "My buddy kept saying I needed to sit alone and 'take notes on how to have a better sense of humor.'"

"I've got a couple pens in my bag if you need them," she replied, and that killer smile became a warm laugh. "I'm Carol, by the way. In case you need to text your buddy after the show about how you sat with a chick who snorts when she laughs."

He grinned. "I'm James. But I'm pretty sure your laugh's not what I'll be texting him about."

The glint in his eye caught her off guard for a second before she burst out laughing. "Wow," she said, shaking her head. "That was—something."

"You like that?"

"If I were a drunk sorority girl, maybe." James laughed again, and Carol decided there were worse things to listen to for the next couple hours. "You're lucky you have nice arms, or I might've punched you."

"I think I could take you."

"And I think two-thirds of my coworkers *and* all the guys in my old unit would disagree," she shot back. He raised his eyebrows, instantly curious, and Carol flinched. Jessica always bitched that she "scared off hot guys by going all Captain Danvers on their asses"; the way James was now sizing her up, she thought maybe her friend had a point. "I used to be in the air force," she said when he kept staring.

"Really."

"Really. And if this is the part of the conversation where you get intimidated by that, just let me know. My drinks are comped, so I can drown my sorrows on somebody else's dime."

She expected him to laugh again, or at least try a grin—most the guys who ended up fleeing to the other side of a bar when she brought up her time in the service at least did it politely—but James just put down his glass. "Guys get intimidated by that?"

“My friend Jess says it’s something about not wanting to sleep with somebody who could kick your ass.”

James snorted, and she thought she saw the corner of his mouth kick up into the start of a smile. “Well, just for the record, I find it kind of refreshing—even if I could still take you.”

Carol smirked at him as she picked up her glass again. “Despite the fact I was in the air force?”

“*Because* you were in the air force,” James replied, shrugging one of his distracting shoulders. “In the Marines, we usually just called you all pansies.”

She managed to hold back her bark of laughter for a half second before it came tumbling out, so loud and sudden that the couple at the next table over turned to look at her. James grinned around the lip of his glass, and it took every ounce of her self-preservation not to reach over and slug him in the arm just for being a witty asshole. “I would prove it right now if I was dressed to kick your ass,” she warned him, gesturing to her stupid, shiny red blouse that Jessica’d conned her into buying last weekend.

He eyed her shirt for a couple seconds before his gaze drifted down to the rest of her. “I’m not complaining,” he decided, and Carol at least let herself elbow him the once as the lights started to dim.

The show turned out to be a collection of various comedians, each doing short and surprisingly-funny sets. The first time Carol snorted when she laughed, James glanced her way and grinned like he’d won the lottery; when she rolled her eyes at him, he just grinned brighter. By the time they made it to intermission, Carol’s sides hurt from laughing and her throat felt dry. “I need another drink just to survive the night,” she said, picking up her glass.

James slid it out of her fingers—he even had nice *hands*, dammit—and stood. “I’ll get you a refill.”

“Save your money, the friend who bought me the ticket apparently paid for my drinks ahead of time.”

“My buddy did the same thing,” James replied with a shrug, and disappeared into the crowd. Carol was not going to admit to watching his back—and other parts of his anatomy, because dear *lord*, did the man have any flaws?—as he walked away. At least, not aloud.

She pulled out her phone and exchanged a couple texts with Jessica while she waited for her refill. Halfway through her reply to *WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU ARE SITTING WITH A GUY WHO DOESN’T THINK CAPTAIN DANVERS IS A SCARY BITCH?!*, James slipped back into his chair. She tucked her phone away and thanked him.

“So,” he said after a sip of his own drink, something amber-colored that caught in the dim club lights, “what kind of guy buys you a single ticket for a comedy show *and* pays for your drinks?”

“I never said it was a guy,” Carol pointed out, but he just raised an eyebrow at her. She snorted a laugh and shook her head. “We do this Secret Santa at work,” she explained, waving a hand. “It’s supposed to be cheap as hell, but one of the guys I work with—who has no respect for boundaries, by the way—believes that because he’s got more money than sense, the rules don’t apply to him. He did okay with this, though.”

James nodded, but his face was knotted in something like concern. She watched as he pressed his lips into a tight line and set down his glass. “Your coworker wouldn’t happen to be a mouthy ex-engineer with a goatee—”

“And the most patient wife in the history of mankind?” Carol asked carefully. They stared at each other for a few seconds before, very slowly, James nodded. She slammed her glass down on the table. “Dammit, Tony! Oh my fucking god, I should’ve known that this wasn’t just his first good deed of the decade!”

James let out a huff of a laugh and shook his head. “Lemme guess: he spent the last six months threatening to set you up with somebody and you kept saying no.”

“Of *course* I said no. I mean, no offense, but I’m not sure I want to date somebody who actually likes Stark.”

“Hey, none taken,” James replied, holding up a hand. “And you’re lucky, because at least he’s not convinced that he knows your ‘type’ and wants to prove it.”

Carol stopped in the middle of an angry swig of her vodka tonic to glance over at him. “And what kind of girl does Tony think you’re into?”

“No *way* am I telling you that.”

“Come on,” she pressed. “The least you can do is tell the woman you don’t want to be on a blind date with what kind of woman she *is*.”

She allowed James about five seconds of consideration before she waved a hand to encourage him. He sighed. “He thinks I like the Beyonce back-up dancer type, and yes, that is the exact way he put it.”

Carol cackled. “Oh, then there is *no* way he meant to hook you up with me,” she replied, shaking her head.

She reached to take another sip of her drink, but when she glanced back over at the man beside her, she realized that his eyes were slowly sweeping down the length of her body. She felt a half-unfamiliar warmth creep into her cheeks, and she fought it down with a greedy gulp from her glass. After she swallowed, James shrugged. “I’m not so sure he messed up,” he said, and his voice rumbled like distant thunder.

Carol sucked in a sharper breath than she meant to before wetting her lips. “I might agree with that for once.”

James grinned again, and she instantly decided that she both liked and hated what that did to her stomach. “We just can’t tell him that,” he replied, and she laughed as the lights started to dim for the second half of the show.

Bruce cursed the portion of his childhood that was spent in sunny California as the frigid February air whipped around him. His shoulders drew up closer to his ears as his gloved hands went deeper into his pockets. He caught Natasha smirking at him out of the corner of his eye; her coat wasn’t even buttoned and her bare hands swung slightly at her sides.

"Need me to stop and build a fire?" she challenged. "Or can you make it the rest of the two blocks to the restaurant?"

"Not all of us can be scary Soviets," he shot back.

She shrugged. “World might be better off for it.”

“History books disagree with you,” he chuckled.

They’d decided on trying the new Moroccan place downtown as the location for their first official date. Tony’d offered to get them into any restaurant in town Bruce wanted, but the sole thought of being on a first date for the first time in thirteen years was terrifying enough on its own that Bruce didn’t want to have to throw in things like remembering which fork to use. So instead he was grateful when Natasha agreed to dine at a place where eating with your fingers was not only acceptable but encouraged.

He breathed a sigh of relief when they entered their destination for several reasons: it was warm, the air smelled like deliciously spiced lamb, and there were no students in sight. Beside him, Natasha let out a small hum. “Smells good.”

Bruce nodded. “Tony said it the kebabs were to die for.”

Natasha smirked and jerked her head to Bruce’s right. “Surprised he remembered what the food tasted like when there was a show like that.” He turned to see a woman in a shiny bikini top and sheer skirts belly dancing at a table, her jewelry tinkling with every shake and gyration. He wondered if he was staring a bit too long at the show when Natasha’s breath blew hot on his ear. “That the kind of thing you’re into?” she whispered. “Pretty sure I could figure out how to shimmy like that if you wanted.”

He swallowed hard and blinked a few times at the offer. The hostess saved him from an answer with her greeting. “Uh, yeah, hi,” he responded. “Reservation for two under Banner.”

The young woman ran her finger down a list of names before nodding with a smile. “Right this way,” she said as she led them to a low table on the ground tucked away in a dark corner.

Bruce caught the brief look of nervousness before Natasha quickly masked it with neutrality and he silently cursed himself for being slow with a response to her offer. She moved in front of him, and he caught her hips in his hands causing her to go still. He ducked his head to whisper, “No fair trying to kill me with mental images like that before we even sit down for dinner.”

The smirk she threw over her shoulder made him feel slightly better, but no less heady. They ordered mint tea and their meals and talked about safe topics—work, their mutual friends, if and when they’d get a snow day this year—while waiting on their food. Once it arrived, they sat in companionable silence as they ate while people-watching the guests around them. Natasha waved off the offer for dessert before asking for the check. When it came, Bruce picked it up and slipped his debit card inside the little pocket. He handed it back to the waiter and turned in surprise when Natasha asked what her half of the bill cost.

“Umm, nothing,” he answered, butterflies once again occupying his stomach in fear of missing some social cue that had developed over the last decade. “My treat.”

“Well, I can get the next one,” she offered.

His stomach quelled somewhat at the prospect of a second date, but he shook his head. “Yeah, maybe I’m old fashioned, or maybe just *old*, but I’m not going to let you pay for my meals.” A measuring stare was the only response he got. “You ready to go?”

She nodded and stood gracefully from the pillows. He tried to emulate her, but at least managed not to groan while standing. Once they were back out in the bitter cold, he bent his elbow in a silent offer. She stared at the gesture for a moment before slipping her hand in the crook of his arm. “You really are old fashioned, aren’t you?” she asked.

He shrugged. "For right now, I just want the added body heat."

Natasha rolled her eyes but still moved slightly closer to him as they walked the path back to his car. He smiled over at her before sneaking a quick kiss to the top of her head; Bruce felt a thrill go through him at the fact that he could show such a gesture in public. Natasha looked up at him as he pulled away, and he easily recognized the heat in her eyes. She gently pulled them to a stop before reaching up on her toes to kiss him. He sighed contentedly at the contact, the familiar scent of her shampoo, and the taste of spices on her tongue. They remained tangled up in each other until he heard a passerby scoff; only then did he pull away with a sheepish grin. "C'mon," he said before tugging her in the direction of his car.

When he pulled into her parking lot, he kept the engine idling. "You can come in if you want," she offered.

The thought was incredibly tempting but he shook his head. "I still have a few more things to get ready before tomorrow. I have a habit of putting things off until the last minute on the weekends." Once more, her eyes flickered over his face in the darkness of the car. She leaned over the cupholders to give him a kiss good night. It started out soft and gentle but devolved into something heated and nearly filthy—no doubt her way of showing him what he was missing out on, as if he could forget. When she pulled away, Bruce took a few steadying breaths in an attempt to redirect blood flow. "See you in the morning," Natasha whispered against his lips before getting out of his car.

"Did you get hurt?" one of Steve's second-graders from Bucky's class asked him on Monday.

They were working with clay again today, building up from their original projects to create little clay bowls and cups that would eventually be painted and fired. The second-grader in question, Ann-Marie, had a chunk of clay stuck in her hair. Steve sent Henry Odinson, who sat next to her, a warning look before picking it out for her and putting it back on the table.

"I didn't get hurt," he promised, crouching down. Ann-Marie spent a lot of her energy worrying about whether people were hurt or sick, but Pepper'd investigated and had yet to figure out why. Steve thought maybe she was just a little sensitive; the one time he'd mentioned her to Clint, the other teacher'd bristled and suggested a whole line of other, more sinister reasons. He crouched down next to the little girl. "Remember that you don't want any gaps or holes in what you're making, okay? But it looks really good."

She beamed at him. "I'm going to paint it green," she said, and Steve smiled back. He was just about to stand up and check in on another table when she added, "But you do have an ouchie."

"An ouchie?" he repeated. He glanced at his hands, wrists, and arms, but he hardly even had a hang-nail. He wondered if he'd nicked himself shaving. "Is it on my face, maybe?"

Ann-Marie shook her head. "It's on your neck."

"My brother had something like that once," a boy named Teddy offered. "He said he got stung by a bee, but my mom said he got stung by his girlfriend."

Steve felt his mouth go dry—not that his students noticed. "Your brother's girlfriend has a stinger?" Ann-Marie asked, concerned.

"My uncle's girlfriend Darcy has long nails like claws," Henry chimed in.

"Your uncle's girlfriend is named Darcy?" Steve asked the boy, momentarily confused.

Henry nodded and looked ready to reply, but Ann-Marie cut him off. “Did you get stung by a bee or a girlfriend?”

Teddy heaved a sigh. “Mister Rogers doesn’t have a girlfriend. All the teachers tell us when they have girlfriends.”

“Some of the teachers have wives,” Katrina added from a few chairs down.

“Mister Coulson has a husband,” Henry pointed out snottily. Then, he frowned, his face creasing in confusion. “Do boyfriends have stingers like girlfriends do?”

“Let’s, uh, focus on our projects, okay?” Steve suggested. The kids all complained for a couple seconds about wanting to learn more about people’s “stingers,” but somehow, he managed to steer them back on task. After he made his rounds of the classroom, he stopped briefly at the hand-washing station.

In the mirror, he could clearly see a red-and-purple mark cresting over the top of his collar. In no way did it resemble a bee sting—unless bees liked to suck possessive marks onto their boyfriends’ necks.

On his next trip around the classroom, Ann-Marie stopped him to check her bowl for gaps. After he finished, she asked, “Do boyfriends and girlfriends really have stingers?”

Steve smiled at her. “I think that’s a great question for Mister Barnes,” he replied, and moved on to the next table.

“Uh, do you have a minute?” Steve Rogers asked, and Darcy glanced up just in time to watch him rub the back of his neck.

School’d ended an hour ago, which *technically* meant Darcy needed to stay for at least another forty-five minutes and finish up the pile of paperwork on her desk, but a quick peek at her watch revealed she was already running late. She stuffed her cell phone in the side pocket of her bag and reached for her coat. “Oh, Hottie Who’ll Never Go For Me, what I wouldn’t give to say yes, but Jane’s already going to skin me alive like that guy in *Silence of the Lambs*.”

“Doctor Foster?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. Thor had some cross-beam something-or-other disaster at work and needs to stay late, but Jane’s talking science tonight at the university and— Wow, your eyes just glazed over.” Steve flushed, looking almost embarrassed, and she waved a hand. “Come on, you can walk me to my car. I can clutch your arm when I slip on the ice.”

“The parking lot’s pretty clear.”

“Uh, have you seen your arms? You’d slip on ice to clutch them, too.” He laughed, his weirdly serious face finally breaking, and Darcy finished buttoning her coat. “But quick, because Jane is probably teaching the boys *it puts the lotion on its skin* right now.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head at her, but the serious expression returned the second they made it out into the foyer. “Did one of the kids’ parents die or something?” she asked. “Because Fury usually gives me a heads up before I end up making an awkward ‘Joey missed school today’ phone call.”

“No, nobody died,” he replied. He looked over his shoulder, and Darcy actually stopped at the

front doors to shoot him a pointed look. He flushed again. “Henry Odinson brought up his uncle in art class today.”

“Please don’t tell me he retold Loki’s stupid Norse ghost story,” she groaned. She pushed out the front doors, Steve following behind in just his cozy blue sweater. “I told him the kids’d just retell it until their classmates wet their pants.”

“It’s not about a ghost story, no.” She glanced back at him and watched him frown. “But you, uh, know Henry’s uncle?”

“Loki? Sure. I mean, he’s a skinny hipster in a family of linebackers. Kind of hard to miss.” She stepped off the curb and shrugged. “Why?”

“Henry seems to think you’re dating him.”

Despite the whole thing about slipping on imaginary ice, Darcy actually caught her foot on a weird dip in the asphalt and started to lose her balance. Steve reached out and grabbed her arm before she face-planted, but she broke away immediately so she could swivel around and gape at him. “He *what?*”

Steve looked at the ground for a couple seconds, and Darcy was suddenly grateful that Bucky’s class went to art on Mondays instead of, say, computers. “The kids were talking about girlfriends and boyfriends, and Henry volunteered that his uncle had a girlfriend Darcy with long fingernails. And I didn’t know if it’s common knowledge, so—”

“It’s not,” Darcy interrupted. Steve blinked at her, surprise catching in his unfairly pretty eyes, and she raised her hands. “It’s not common knowledge because it’s not a thing. Loki and I aren’t dating. We’re nowhere *near* dating.”

“Oh.” Steve looked away again. If sheepiness was an Olympic sport, he’d be winning the gold. “Well, for the record, he brought it up in Bucky’s class, too.”

“Of *course* he did,” she muttered. Her cell phone went off, the text tone muffled in her bag, and she groaned. “Listen, I have to go before Jane kills me—”

“And wears a Buffalo Bill-style Darcy skin suit,” Steve said with a tiny smile.

“—but I’m definitely not dating Loki. Or anyone. But especially not Loki. Okay?”

“Okay,” he answered, and he even let her squeeze one of his completely unreal arms before she ran across the parking lot and half-fell into her car.

Jane was already climbing into her car when Darcy made it into the garage, apologizing breathlessly thanks to her jog over from next door. “There’s a ton of food in the fridge, make whatever you want,” Jane called over the sound of the car engine, “and Thor should be home before I am!”

“Sure!” Darcy shouted back, but then Jane was pulling out of the driveway, complete with a little tire squeal. She walked into the house but barely kicked off her shoes before Alva was attached to her legs.

“Where’s Uncle Loki?”

Darcy discovered it was really hard to unbutton her coat with a tiny chin jutting into her hip. “Uh, he’s wherever he decided he wants to be tonight.”

“But not with you?”

“Nope.”

Alva frowned. “But aren’t boyfriends and girlfriends supposed to always be together?”

“We’re not— Okay, look,” Darcy said, shucking her coat onto the floor and crouching down to look Alva in the big, curious eyes. “First, it’s really not good for boyfriends and girlfriends to always be together. That’s called codependence, and it’s why you’re never reading the *Twilight* books as long as I’m around.”

“Are there ponies?”

“What?”

“In the two-light books.”

“Uh, I don’t think so,” Darcy replied with a little shrug, “but I was mostly in it for Taylor Lautner’s naked body.” Alva’s brow knitted together in confusion, and Darcy shook her head. “That’s not important. The other important thing is that your uncle and I aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

“Can boys and girls be friends?” a voice asked from just outside the mud room, and Darcy glanced up to see George standing in the doorway. He pressed his cheek to the doorjamb. “Because my friend Paul liked a girl in our class and now they’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“And Mister Stark kept saying Miss Potts was his friend and then they became husband and wife but with different names, like Mom and Dad,” Henry added from behind his brother. “Are you that kind of friend with Uncle Loki?”

“No,” Darcy stressed, and all three children frowned at her. She sighed and dragged fingers through her hair. “I mean, yes, boys and girls can be friends without being boyfriend and girlfriend,” she clarified, dropping to sit on her knees. Alva leaned against her. “And sure, Ton— Mister Stark was friends with Miss Potts before they got married, but they dated before they tied the knot.”

“You tie knots at weddings?” Alva asked.

Darcy resisted her urge to bang her head against the door behind her. “My point,” she emphasized, “is that I don’t know where your uncle is, because he is just a friend. And we will keep doing friend stuff without getting married. Which is what adults do, sometimes, and it’s totally no—”

The rest of the word was drowned out by the sound of the front door opening and an infuriatingly familiar voice calling out, “It’s too bad there are no children here to help me eat these cupcakes I brought over!” Before Darcy could even blink, all three of the kids took off running. The whole damn house echoed with their shouts of *Uncle Loki*.

By the time Darcy hung up her coat and stowed her shoes in the pile with the light-up sneakers and pink snow boots, the kids were at the kitchen table, each with a cupcake nearly as big as their head. Loki stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the front hall, a self-satisfied smile on his face and a plastic bag dangling from his fingers. “Thor said you might be here,” he commented.

“Might?”

He shrugged, and Alva looked up from her cupcake to grin at Darcy. There was already frosting all

over her face. “He’s here because he’s your boyfriend,” she said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

“He’s *not* my boyfriend,” Darcy reminded her, but Alva just flashed her a frosting-tinted grin. She rolled her eyes as she stalked over to Loki and lightly smacked him in the arm. “You’re not helping.”

“No, but I *did* bring you a red velvet cupcake. I think, in the end, that makes us even.”

“Oh, shut up,” she retorted, and she smacked him again before she took the bag.

Steve stepped out of the shower into the steam-clouded bathroom just in time to hear his cell phone chime in the bedroom. He stopped reaching for his towel to frown at the sound; it was, at the latest, 6:30 a.m. The only time he ever received early morning texts was for snow days and other school-related disasters.

He dried himself off quickly and left drips across the bathroom floor and then the bedroom as he grabbed his phone and unlocked it without even glancing at the notifications on the lock screen.

He only realized how big a mistake this was once he saw the waiting text:

Bucky Barnes: *I dreamed about the other night and it’s really hard to get going when parts of you want to GET GOING with your hot boyfriend.*

Steve felt a flush climb up his neck. He couldn’t help it; he might not have been a blushing virgin (like Tony apparently suspected), but Bucky was probably the most verbal person he’d ever dated.

Both in *and* out of bed.

He sat down on the edge of the mattress before opening the reply screen. *I need to pretend I didn’t get this message before I get distracted*, he warned.

Bucky’s reply zipped through only a few seconds later. *Maybe I want you distracted. Maybe I’m distracted right now.*

Worse than the blood flooding Steve’s face was the blood flooding elsewhere. He swallowed and glanced at the clock. He felt like a high school student trying to calculate whether he could spare an extra fifteen minutes in bed and still make the bus. *Is that a euphemism?*

No. I tried to ignore it, got through my shower okay, but now I’m stuck thinking about your mouth.

Steve looked at the clock again. If he ate some toast in the car, he probably wouldn’t be late. *Is that really all you’re thinking about?* he typed back as he unknotted his towel.

Hardly, Bucky replied, and Steve let out a shaky laugh as he swung fully back into bed.

In the end, he arrived at the school about five minutes later than he wanted to, feeling harried and disorganized. He dropped off his bag at his desk, ready to immediately head out for bus duty, when he discovered Bucky standing in his doorway. He was still in his coat and with his bag slung over his shoulder.

“You made me late,” Steve chided, but his stomach felt warm the second Bucky grinned at him.

“I made both of us late, and you loved it.” Steve rolled his eyes and headed toward the door, but

Bucky refused to move. They stood there, nearly chest-to-chest. Steve could smell the cold on him. "It was a pretty good morning, you know," Bucky added.

Steve caught himself watching the other man's lips. "I could think of better," he replied casually, and Bucky actually laughed before stepping just far enough out of his way that their shoulders brushed as Steve headed out to the busses.

Phil nudged a barking Birdie out of the way to answer the door. Natasha stood on the stoop, extending a bottle of wine. He peered at the label through his reading glasses a moment before saying, "I suppose that's a decent enough red to let you into our home."

"Who is it?" Clint yelled from the kitchen.

Phil prodded Birdie with his foot a second time in an effort to calm her down before stepping out of the way so Natasha could come in out of the cold. "The prodigal daughter has returned."

Clint walked far enough out of the kitchen and into the living room to inspect things with his own eyes. "Well, then dinner's going to be all wrong because I killed the fattened pig, not calf."

Natasha arched a red eyebrow his direction. "I didn't realize you were so fluent in biblical stories."

Clint made a face of confusion. "Not a clue about that. I just know it's what Mom says whenever we come to visit the Coulson compound."

Phil felt an eye roll coming but repressed it. Instead, he took Natasha's coat and hung it in the closet by the front door before following Natasha toward the tiny dining room off the side of the kitchen. He did take the opportunity to inhale deeply over the stove but was quickly swatted away by Clint and his wooden spoon. He snuck a quick kiss to husband's jaw and moved on through to the dining room where Natasha had already opened the bottle of wine and set out glasses.

Clint sighed heavily when he saw the bottle. "How many times do I have to tell you I prefer beer?"

"I brought you beer last time. It's the adults' turn to enjoy the alcohol for the evening," Natasha retorted. "Need any help?"

Clint waved her off. "Got it. Everything's about ready, just bring your plates in here and dish up."

They served themselves helpings of pork loin, rice pilaf, and mixed vegetables before settling in at the dining table. Phil engaged Natasha in a conversation about the next school year—budgets, what supplies she'd like to acquire, what changes she would make to the schedule. He didn't have to look at Clint to know that he was keeping a watchful eye on their dinner guest, even though he gave the impression of either only caring about devouring his food or being bored out of his mind. "So, are you better?" he blurted out once they'd all cleaned their plates.

Natasha looked at him with raised eyebrows for a second before she got her facial expressions back under control. "Getting there," she answered with a single-shouldered shrug. Clint stared at her until she sighed and elaborated. "We decided to give things an honest try." The men didn't miss how her words seemed to trail off.

"But?" Phil prompted.

Natasha rolled her lips as she debated how to word her answer. "Before, it was just sex. I honestly just thought it would be a one-time thing. Wouldn't be the first time I've done something like that, but..."

“Huge cock?” Clint asked with a dangerous grin. “Couldn’t resist going back for seconds?”

She glared across the table at him before continuing. “It was better than I thought it would be. And I felt... safe.”

“Until he called things off?” Phil asked. Clint kicked his foot under the table in a silent message to keep his mouth shut in order to keep Natasha talking, but Phil couldn’t help but feel his protective-older-brother hackles rise.

Natasha nodded. “Until then. But he told me that he was too scared to admit what he truly wanted. At least the first time. We talked it over and decided to try things, but it’s different.”

“Because it’s an actual relationship?” Phil questioned.

“Because there’s no sex.”

“What?” Clint asked in somewhat-mock horror. “I mean, you’re not totally my type, but is this guy insane?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want there to be sex. At least not yet,” Phil offered.

“Not what I said,” Natasha answered. “Especially when everyone and their dog is getting laid at work and I can’t even get a good fondle out of him.”

“This guy has to be insane not to want to get down and dirty with you,” Clint reiterated. “Don’t you think so?” he asked Phil, who shrugged in return. “Right, I forgot we’re talking about the wrong redhead.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “Please, I do not want to have sex with Pepper.”

“You’d be reluctant at first,” Clint said, “but then you guys would come up with an agenda and a list of goals for what you hoped to accomplish, and everything would be so neat and organized that you’d get hot and bothered just from the paperwork alone.”

“You realize the more you talk, the less chance you have of getting hot and bothered tonight, right?” Phil responded.

Clint smirked at him. “You do remember what happened the last time you threatened that, right? And how it happened twice?”

“Gross,” Natasha muttered.

Clint laughed. “Hey, pretty sure Banner’s not getting any either if it makes you feel any better.”

Natasha ran her index finger around the lip of her wine glass before admitting, “That’s the crux of the problem.”

Phil was glad they’d finished with dinner because otherwise both he and Clint might have choked on food upon hearing her declaration. “You? And Banner?” Clint asked. She gave a small nod. “I think my brain is broken,” he muttered.

Events of the last few months began to filter through Phil’s mind in a new light, things now clicking into place when before they’d just been fragmented pieces. The same thing was apparently happening in Clint’s mind because he asked, “So when you guys showed up late on Thanksgiving?” A small grin from Natasha was all the answer he needed and he groaned. “I don’t

know whether to be proud or disgusted.”

“How badly is the lack of sex bothering you?” Phil asked.

“I think I know why he’s doing it—he said he wanted this to be different, to be an actual relationship. So I’m fairly certain he’s just trying to show that he sees me as something more than someone to have sex with.”

“But,” Clint added.

“But I really liked the sex. And I’m scared he’s going to go all chivalrous, and while that’s nice of him, it’s just not what I really look for.”

Clint shrugged. “Just start stripping and he’ll get the hint. It’s what I do.”

“Next time I’m just going to leave you standing there naked,” Phil shot back.

“Remember what happened the last time you said that, too?”

Phil shook his head and pushed away from the table. He waved off Clint and Natasha’s offer to help clean up, but decided it was best to give the two of them some alone time to chat. The age difference between Natasha and himself often caused things to turn into a father-daughter feeling, and he figured she’d rather have someone closer in life experience to chat with. He put away leftovers, loaded the dishwasher, and ignored Birdie’s whining about not being snuck any leftovers like her other father had a habit of doing.

A few hours later, when Phil and Clint climbed into bed, Clint rolled over onto his side to say, “Don’t.”

Don’t what? Phil signed in the dark since Clint’d already removed his hearing aids and had issues reading lips in the dark.

“Don’t go into uber-protective mode over her with Bruce and lecture him about how he needs to take care of her. She’ll get beyond pissed at you and you know it.”

He didn’t respond, at least not immediately. And he certainly didn’t admit to already half-writing a speech along those very lines to give to the kindergarten teacher in the morning.

“I don’t think I ever had a fantasy about doing it in a kiln room,” Bucky gasped, struggling with Steve’s belt—why couldn’t he go without, save everybody a step in the process? “Is this an art teacher thing?”

Steve’s hands slipped under Bucky’s shirt, the delicious heat of those warm palms against his bare sides causing his hips to cant forward completely involuntarily. Steve smiled, all treacherously sexy, and Bucky considered dropping to his knees right there. “It was this or trying the supply closet upstairs,” he noted.

When he leaned in to nip Bucky’s neck, Bucky rolled his hips forward against Steve’s leg. For a couple seconds, they devolved into breathy moaning, with Steve’s hands possessively spread over Bucky’s side and one of Bucky’s hands curled over the delicious curve of Steve’s ass.

He wanted the khakis off that ass. He’d deal with the boxer briefs in their own time.

“Supply closet upstairs feels like a tomcat marking its territory,” Bucky decided as his other hand

finished with Steve's belt and popped his fly. "And enough of them use it, we might need to make a time-share schedule, which is kind of weird." Steve let out this helpless grunt as Bucky's hand slipped past the layers of fabric and found— "Have you been waiting to drag me in here all *day*?"

"Pretty much," Steve panted, and tipped his face against Bucky's neck. Bucky abandoned all his other plans and pulled Steve a little closer, shoving down his pants and underwear just far enough that he wouldn't end up with a wrist sprain. The little whine that escaped from between Steve's lips nearly killed him. "You can't send a guy an e-mail about going home together without—" He hissed when Bucky twisted his wrist. "—consequences."

"I'm sending you a hundred e-mails like that if these are the consequences," Bucky replied, and he swallowed Steve's next noisy little moan in a hard kiss.

Pepper didn't really register the sound of Tony coming in from the garage, even when he turned on the sink to undoubtedly rinse away grease. Part of her did notice him humming under his breath, but it wasn't till she heard the lyrics that she paid him any attention.

"Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match. Find me some dick. Catch me some snatch."

"No," Pepper replied firmly as she put down her journal. "Not even close to the right lyrics."

Tony shrugged. "Only changed two words. Think that's pretty close. Besides, I think *Fiddler* needs a bit of an update. Maybe a new title--*Diddler on the Roof*?"

She shook her head as she rose from the couch and made her way into the open plan kitchen. "Please don't ever say the word 'snatch' again."

"C'mon, it's not like I'm unaffectionate to yours. In fact, just this morning—"

"If you ever want to experience anything like that again, you will stop using that word." Tony raised his now clean hands in a sign of surrender, but the smile lingered under his goatee. "Out of curiosity, how long am I going to have to hear about your adventures in yenta-ing?"

Tony grin broadened. "I receive texts at least every three hours from both Carol and Rhodey, but the more they text, the more I believe what they're really trying to say is *thank you*."

Pepper had received some texts herself from her two friends since the comedy show a few nights ago, and she could see that under the frustration there was some attraction, but she wasn't about to help inflate her husband's ego. "Don't go poking things with a stick."

He put on a face of mock hurt. "Would I do something like that?" he asked as he pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator. She shot him a look to cut the act and he shrugged. "The plan all along was to just get them at the same place at the same time. Done and done. Whatever happens now happens."

"I wish I could believe you when you say that."

"Pep—"

"I'm not saying you're a liar, Tony. I'm just saying that your worst kept secret is that you're a closet romantic. Two of your best friends now have the possibility to start relationships, and I know your excitement can easily transfer into an unwanted and unenthusiastic nosiness."

Tony took a long pull from his bottle of water. "I'm not trying to be nosy."

“I know,” Pepper told him softly as she wrapped her arms around his waist and settled against him. “You just want everyone to be happy. It’s just that you can be a little overbearing about it.”

“I’m not going to go planning weddings for Bruce and Rhodes, relax.”

“Not yet, anyway,” she mumbled into his neck.

He rubbed a hand up and down her back, and Pepper could practically hear the wheels in his head turning. It was a noise she was used to, and even though it usually ended in some crazy scheme, Tony’s brain was something she did find incredibly sexy, especially when it was accompanied by the soft, little hums under his breath as thoughts connected in his mind.

“We could do double dates,” Tony said.

“No,” she disagreed.

“I’ll behave.”

“No, you won’t, and across the table will either be Natasha Romanoff or Carol Danvers. They can both kill you without breaking a sweat.”

“Think of all the shoes you can buy with the insurance money.”

“I’d rather have you.”

Tony’s cell phone buzzed in his back pocket and he fished out to see read his new text message. “I think Carol downloaded some new emoticon app to send this one. Something’s supposed to be on fire,” he said tilting his phone in case the new point of view would offer some clarification. “Can’t tell if it’s supposed to be me or her pants when she keeps telling me how mad she is at me.”

“Tony,” Pepper said in a warning tone.

“I haven’t responded to any of her texts, which could be pissing her off even more, but I think we can both agree that I’m making a smarter choice by keeping my mouth shut. But it could still be fun, you know, the double date thing. We never do couples stuff.”

“Phil and Clint have invited us over for dinner a number of times.”

Tony shuddered. “Specs and his hubby with their little dog? Too cutesy for me to keep my appetite.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “More like you’re worried Clint will infer that they have more sex than we do.”

“Physically impossible,” Tony scoffed. “You don’t have a refractory period, lets you rack up orgasms much faster than—“

“Tony, focus.”

“Double dates could be fun, Pepper. And I promise not to make a single joke about swinging the entire time.” She pulled away to raise a skeptical set of eyebrows at him. “At least not for a month or two.”

Bucky had no idea what time it was when the text tone jangled on his phone, just that it was dark outside and he was sore. It was a good kind of sore, the kind you felt after a really hard work out or

a long run, and he stretched in bed as he reached for the bedside table.

Next to him, Steve shifted and pressed his face into the back of Bucky's shoulder. "No moving," he mumbled. His voice sounded thick and drawn out, but it was dark and sweet. Like molasses, Bucky thought as he shifted to look at the curve of Steve's naked body in the almost-dark of the room.

He noticed for the first time that they'd left all the lights on in his apartment before stumbling into the bedroom. Then again, they'd been a little preoccupied.

Another text jangled through, and Bucky pressed his face into the pillow. "If Tony's texting me about why we didn't go to happy hour, I'll—"

"It won't be Tony," Steve said immediately. Bucky let the heat of his breath against his bare skin distract him for a half-second before he raised his head. Steve shifted too, pulling away far enough that they could look at one another, and immediately flushed a delicious shade of pink. It crawled down his chest. Bucky swore he'd someday spend a couple hours nipping and sucking along the path of Steve's blushes. "I told him we weren't coming."

Bucky's phone chimed again, but he didn't even glance at it. "Did you tell him what we were doing?"

"No, but he—might have assumed." Bucky burst out laughing, and Steve elbowed him. "He says I have the worst 'boner-based poker face' on the planet."

"I'm pretty sure he's right about that," Bucky retorted, and Steve retaliated by pinning him to the mattress and kissing him until he forgot what they were bickering about.

Another half-hour or so later, once Steve'd rolled out of Bucky's bed and gone to scrounge around the kitchen for food, Bucky remembered his cell phone. All three waiting messages were from Natasha.

He thought for a moment something might be wrong, but not once he actually read what was waiting for him.

you can't stay in bed with him forever.

you need to at least get up long enough to rehydrate.

if I'm the one who finds your mummified corpse after death by sex, I'm rifling through all your drawers before I call the cops.

Bucky groaned and pressed his face into the pillow for a few seconds. *I hate you so much right now*, he finally responded, and in his head, he could hear her laughing.

Valentine's Day

Pepper should've realized there were rumors circulating around the school that she was on a war path when Tony actually took the time to knock on her office door before barging in. "I come in peace," he announced as he walked in, hands raised in a sign of surrender.

Pepper sighed, feeling her shoulders slump at the greeting. "Have I been that awful today?"

Tony gently kicked the door shut behind him before dropping into one of the chairs across from her desk. "I know it has more to do with all the shit you've been dealing with this week—the kids in the car accident, new divorces, the charge of child abuse—than your uterus doing some spring cleaning."

Pepper grimaced at his choice of words. "Could you not phrase it like that?"

"Would you rather I say 'because you are *menstruating*'?" he asked, drawing the last word out for all its worth.

"Neither."

"Sweetheart, we've been married for two years; we share a bed and a bathroom—I know what goes down. Besides, I see each month as a celebration that we're baby-free for another four weeks."

"You do remember how you got snipped a couple months after our wedding, right?"

Tony shrugged. "Never underestimate the power of my sperm." Pepper groaned at the reply. "And since you're obviously not in the most romantic of moods today—and not just for Mother Nature reasons, I'm not saying that—I decided that your evening shall be free of me, if you so wish."

Pepper quirked an eyebrow in curiosity, not willing to admit that the only part of Valentine's Day she was in the mood for was chocolate. "You don't have to do that."

"It's fine. I've made plans for myself tonight just in case."

"Please tell me they don't include spying on your two best friends to see if they're out on dates."

"Nah, they get off the hook this year. But next year, if you want to do some *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* thing and pretend to be spies, that can totally be arranged. In fact, we don't even have to wait for next February, we can just—"

"Tony."

"Right," he said as he took a breath to recenter his conversational focus. "I've an agenda all laid out for you. It involves guests in our house, which I made sure was clean, so don't call the cops if you get stranger danger. They're supposed to be there."

"And what will you be doing?"

"Bunch of single nerds with more engineering degrees than fingers are holding a symposium downtown. Thought I'd stop in and point out flaws in their ideas."

Pepper shot him a look. "Please don't get kicked out this time."

"Hey, the other guy started that. Not my fault." He did a motion with his hands that ended with a

couple snaps and a clap. “So you good? This plan alright? Because I’ve got seven others I can put into play, just say the word.”

“Are you doing this so I’ll feel beholden and desire to make things up to you later?”

“Never the plan—at least, not at the forefront of the plan.” He walked around the desk and kissed her on the cheek. “Love you. See you later tonight.”

When Pepper got home, she was greeted by an aromatic scent that nearly made her groan. In the kitchen was the retired chef from a restaurant she and Tony used to eat at all the time, but wasn’t the same anymore since the white-haired man had left. He greeted her with a nod. “I’m supposed to tell you to go upstairs to your bedroom for the schedule. Dinner will be ready in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you,” Pepper responded. She was afraid to ask just how much her husband had paid for him to cook only for her this evening.

Once she was upstairs, she found a note with Tony’s barely-legible scrawl. It told her that now until five-thirty was to be considered hot tub time (a new bathing suit—nothing too skimpy or flashy—was waiting on the bed). Afterwards, a masseuse would be waiting for her in the living room for an hour-long massage. Then she’d be treated to a five-course meal by their favorite chef; a meal containing “all those plates with only three green sprigs and a little circle of protein” that made Tony gripe about how he was going to stop at Burger King afterwards for “real portion sizes.”

Champagne was waiting for her as she scurried outside into the frigid February air before relaxing in the hot tub. Her masseuse came to collect when it was his turn for the evening. He handed her a gift bag from Tony when he was done working all the knots from Pepper’s back and shoulders. Inside was one of the fluffiest robes she’d ever seen. She wrapped it around herself and made her way into the dining room where the chef promptly began his first course. By the time he brought dessert—a molten chocolate dish of heaven—Pepper was on cloud nine. She was fairly certain the moan that escaped her at the first bite of the sweet treat was purely obscene, but she couldn’t bring herself to care.

When Tony came home, she was snuggled down into bed, still wrapped in her new robe. “Good night?” he asked.

“Perfect, thank you. How was yours?”

He proceeded to pace around the bed, his hands barely keeping up with his mouth, as he told her about the various theories and inventions that would never see the light of day for whatever reason. She used the sound of his voice as a white noise machine and found her eyelids growing increasingly heavy. Pepper was almost asleep when she felt the mattress dip beside her. “Pep?” Tony asked quietly. She didn’t answer, not even when she felt him place a lingering kiss on her brow. “Sweet dreams.”

Jane kept her face buried in a journal article discussing quantum singularities as she meandered through the office floor of the planetarium. She weaved around desks until she made it to the southwest corner of the building. Pushing open her office door with her hip, she flopped down at her desk and kept reading, all the while forming a list of arguments to write in a challenge piece, until she noticed a floral scent in the air. Finally, she looked up and found two dozen roses sitting in a cut glass vase on her desk.

“Who left these in here?” she yelled towards the bank of cubicles where her assistant sat.

“They’re from your husband,” a young man she didn’t recognize explained as he stuck his head in through her open door.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Ian. I’m your intern’s intern.”

That statement was enough to pull Jane’s focus from the bouquet, at least momentarily. “Why does my intern need an intern?”

“I don’t—“

“You said these were from Thor?”

“Yes, Doctor Foster.”

“Why?”

She caught the intern-to-the-intern’s quick glance out into the hallway to look for someone else to answer her string of questions; Jane was used to that kind of reaction. “Umm, if I had to guess probably because of what today is and all.”

“Shit,” Jane muttered as she wracked her brain for a possible answer. It was too cold outside to be her anniversary—and her phone had been sending her hourly reminders for the last three days to go buy a present. It wasn’t anyone’s birthday, not Christmas...

“Valentine’s day,” the young man said quietly.

Jane felt her eyes go wide. “That’s today? I thought we were still in January.” She muttered another curse as she sank back down into her office chair. His answer made sense; it explained the scraps of pink and red paper in the trash this morning, Alva bouncing around at breakfast over the possibility of candy, and the boys getting into a shoving match at the end of the drive while waiting for the bus over a girl in Goran’s class named Sammie. She blamed the grant proposal from hell she’d been writing for the last two weeks for not putting all of this together sooner.

“Do you still need me, or...”

She waved the intern-to-the-intern off and ignored the sigh of relief he gave as he bolted from her office and shut the door behind him. Jane took a quick glance at her calendar for the day and was grateful to see that she could slip out early to buy a present this afternoon. She ran her fingers under her pant leg and added shaving to her to-do list as well.

Jane cringed as she picked up her cell phone and opened a new text message to Thor. *Out of curiosity, what’s the plan for tonight?*

Husband: *I have dinner reservations at seven. Darcy will be over to care for the children at six.*

Anything in particular you want as a present?

An evening out alone with my beautiful wife will suffice. Jane waited for the little ellipses bubble that immediately formed after Thor’s message was sent to become something with actual letters. *Although some new lingerie would not go unappreciated.* The winking emoticon that followed with pink and glittery; an app that Alva had downloaded on to both of their phones—one of many—and

caused Thor to win the award for better parent since he didn't immediately delete it like Jane had.

I'll see what I can do.

Jane finished the necessary items for the rest of the day, grateful that she'd finished the grant proposal that morning and sent it off before lunch. She snuck away from the planetarium at a little before three to run to the mall. After picking up a new dress and Thor's lacy gifts, she headed home. She managed to start her shower in peace, but by the time she stepped out into a cloud of steam, she could hear the ruckus of her husband and three children. Jane barely had a silk robe wrapped around her slim frame before Alva burst into the bathroom and half-asked, half-demanded to watch Jane get ready. "Is your homework done?"

"We didn't have any!" she said as she bounced happily, her dirty blonde curls on a slight time delay from her feet. "We had our party instead and everyone said they wanted to be my Valentine."

"Don't let your Daddy hear you say that," Jane muttered as she lifted Alva to sit on the bathroom counter. Jane went about putting her hair in large rollers and started in on her makeup while listening to Alva detail who gave the best Valentines, what candy she got, and exact details about her seven new pencils.

"Are you going to make your eyes smoke?" the girl asked as Jane reached for a smaller brush.

"Am I what?"

"Miss Darcy says when she goes on dates she likes to make her eyes smoke."

Jane grinned when she realized what her daughter was implying. "You think I should have smoky eyes tonight?"

"Yeah!" she said happily. She twisted on the counter so she could look in the mirror as Jane applied her eye shadow. "Mommy, when do I get to wear makeup?"

"Not for a hundred years," a voice behind them boomed. Thor easily scooped his daughter into his large arms and swung her around their, thankfully, large bathroom.

"Doesn't Mommy look pretty?" Alva asked her father dreamily.

"No matter what your mother looks like, she is always the most beautiful woman in the world."

Jane shot him a half-hearted look. "I already shaved; tonight's pretty much a sure thing."

His laugh echoed off the tiled walls. He jostled Alva in his arms before asking, "Would you like to help me pick out which socks to wear this evening?"

"Can I pick out the rest of your clothes?"

"Not this time, love. Just the socks."

Jane chuckled. The last time Thor'd failed to make the distinction, he'd been forced to attend Thanksgiving dinner at his parents' in one of the most garish outfits Jane'd ever seen him wear—and that included a cross-dressing frat party in college.

As they passed by, Thor hooked a finger in the back of Jane's robe to sneak a peek at her purchase from this afternoon. She swatted his hand away. "No looking at your present till after dinner."

"Where's a present?" Alva asked as she squirmed in Thor's arms.

“Mommy is the present,” he answered.

The small girl scrunched her face up in confusion. “Is she going to have a bow on her?”

“There might be a few of those,” Jane replied and smiled as she watched Thor’s eyes go dark.

He swallowed hard before dropping Alva down to the ground. “Go see if Miss Darcy is here and if she needs help with dinner.”

As soon as the girl was gone, Thor wrapped his arms around Jane and began to nuzzle her neck. She swatted at her husband’s hip to make him stop. “Not before we’ve left for dinner and certainly not while the kids are waiting for *their* dinner.”

By the time she was finally dressed and ready to go, Thor and Darcy were already having a debate down in the kitchen while the kids chowed down on mac and cheese. “I was merely hoping that you would be spending this evening with my brother.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, raising one hand in Thor’s direction. “If *anyone* but you’d said that, I’d be punching them in the di—face for how that could be taken, but it’s you. Also, *that’s not a thing.*”

“I believe he wishes it to be a... thing.”

“Well, like I’ve told the both of you a million times before, we are most definitely not a couple.” Darcy turned to watch Jane enter the kitchen and let out a low whistle at the sight. Thor showed his admiration with a mile-wide grin.

“Thanks for watching them tonight,” Jane said. “I’m sure you could’ve had other plans.” She watched Darcy roll her eyes and suck in a breath to start an argument. “I’m not saying those plans had to be with anyone in particular, I meant plans in general.” Darcy deflated at that.

Jane made her way around the kitchen table to kiss each child goodbye as Darcy asked, “Did you even remember what today was?” Jane cast a quick glare at her direction and Darcy laughed. “Pay up, dude. I told you she’d forget.”

“I am already paying you a hefty sum for this evening. Consider part of it your winnings,” he replied as he began to make his way out to the garage.

Jane leaned in as she passed Darcy. “I’ll give you double whatever he paid you if they’re all in bed and actually asleep by the time we get home.”

“Done and done.”

“Our options are the last *Transformers* movie or something called *The Iron Giant*,” Phil called as he walked into the house, and Clint groaned.

As far as Clint’d understood it, most couples created this elaborate plan for Valentine’s Day. They booked restaurants in advance, bought flowers and chocolates, shimmied into new underwear, and generally tried to pretend they were totally different people for one night out of the year. He’d listened to Tony ramble on about his plan for Pepper, and he’d tried very hard not to roll his eyes. Sure, that worked if you were super rich or if you didn’t mind living on Ramen noodles for the rest of February, but he and Phil weren’t those kinds of people.

Plus, they sort of had their own tradition, and Clint *liked* that.

Phil appeared in the kitchen, still in his coat and still smelling of cold, and sidled up behind Clint as he finished cutting the bread to go with— “Is that potato-bacon soup?”

“You’ll have to find out,” Clint replied. Phil reached for the crock pot lid and he twisted around to send him a warning look. “You open that, I’ll make it like the first year when you *couldn’t* get up off the couch.”

Phil smiled at him, his eyes full of promise. “We stayed on the couch last year, too.”

“And that’s how I want tonight to end, since we’re watching *Transformers* and I’m gonna need some entertainment.” Phil’s laugh lines crinkled, and he elbowed him. “At least lose the coat so I can grope you for the last half-hour the soup’s cooking.”

“You’re not good at restraining yourself to a half-hour,” Phil reminded him, but he obediently left the kitchen.

Clint smiled to himself and went back to the bread, and if he dropped Birdie a crumbling piece of crust, nobody needed to know about it. The homemade soup thing actually’d come up their very first Valentine’s Day together, when Phil’d managed to get a sinus infection and bronchitis all in one go and spent an entire three days on his couch, off work and miserable. They’d argued about whether Clint should even stop by his “plague house” on the big day, because the last thing Phil’d wanted to do was pass the germs on and land another teacher housebound for half a week. But by that point, Clint’d been staying almost every night at Phil’s, and spending three days in his own place left him ready to claw the paint off the walls.

They’d been dating just long enough by then that all those treacherous *I could spend the rest of my life with this guy* thoughts had already been climbing under his skin. Those three days’d felt like an eternity.

So Clint’d done the only thing he knew how to do: he shoved himself into Phil’s evening whether Phil’d liked it or not, showing up with crock pot chicken noodle soup, crumbly bread, and a shitty movie about a superhero in a fire-engine red mechanical suit. And they’d spent their first Valentine’s Day as a couple sprawled out on the couch, eating soup and complaining about how bad the movie was. Phil’d broken out a bag of Oreos for dessert, and by the end of the night, Phil mostly-asleep next to him, Clint’d decided he really did love Phil all the way through.

The next year, their first Valentine’s Day as a married couple, Clint’d caught the flu and they’d repeated the routine with two cans of Campbell’s chicken rice soup, a bag of Chips Ahoy cookies, and the first *Transformers* movie. And ever since then, good or bad health, that’d turned into their Valentine’s Day: soup, cookies, and a horrible movie that’d end in either dozing or sex.

Clint’d loved when the mechanical superhero sequel came out, because they’d barely made it a half-hour in before their pants came off.

“It’s smells good,” Phil’s voice commented, and Clint released a slow breath as familiar hands found his waist and held onto him from behind. He abandoned the bread to twist around in Phil’s grip and kiss him. He meant it to be brief and lazy, but Phil apparently had other ideas; Birdie whined as she had to shuffle out of the way to let Phil pin Clint against the counter and kiss him hard, but Clint clung on for dear life.

“I’m supposed to be doing the groping, not you,” Clint pointed out as Phil’s hands shoved under his t-shirt and spread over his bare back.

The ghost of Phil’s lips against his neck made him bite back a moan. “Maybe it’s time to change

things up a bit.”

“Don’t make promises you don’t plan on keeping.”

“Oh, I intend to keep this one,” Phil breathed, and his teeth grazed along Clint’s jaw before they found each other’s mouths again.

An hour and a half later, they flopped onto the couch with their crappy movie and their soup, this time dressed in sweatpants instead of their jeans. They argued about everything from the CGI to the horrible acting as they ate. “I’m just saying that the plot makes no sense,” Clint explained as he popped the last bit of a Fudge Stripe cookie into his mouth.

“I think it’s adapted from a sub-plot from one of the cartoons,” Phil replied with a shrug, “but—”

“Wait, hang on, you know that kind of shit about the *Transformer* cartoons?” Clint demanded. When Phil looked away, he grinned. “How’d you keep this from me for six years? I’ve seen your comic books—”

“I never tried to hide those,” Phil cut in.

“—and I know about your secret goal to have the complete *Babysitter’s Club* and *Boxcar Children* collections in the library, but now we’ve got *Transformers*?” Clint scooted closer to him on the couch. “I’ve never been hotter for you.”

Phil rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth kicked up into a smile. “I could have had any number of men who live in their mothers’ basements, but I chose you. You should feel lucky.”

“Every day,” Clint returned, and leaned in to kiss him.

They kissed, lazy and relaxed, all the way through the big explosion-riddled battle and into the emotional climax of the movie—at least, as much as a movie like *Transformers* can have an emotional climax. By the time the credits rolled, Birdie was whining to go out and Clint was—

“Ready for round two?” Phil asked against his mouth, and then swallowed Clint’s little groan with another kiss.

“You can assemble my autobots any day,” he replied, and laughed when Phil pushed him away and told him to let the dog out.

“Sorry I’m late,” Bruce apologized as he entered Natasha’s condo a good twenty minutes after he’d promised to be there. He set down the paper bag with their take-away meals and started removing his coat. “There was a fender-bender on the corner outside the restaurant, and I couldn’t get out of the—”

The words *parking lot* died on his lips when he glanced up and saw Natasha standing in her living room, her curls pinned back in a rough semblance of a ponytail and a funny little smile on her face. She wore a t-shirt and jeans, nothing particularly special, but something about her expression warmed the deepest part of his belly—and a little lower. He stopped, coat halfway off, and swallowed. “Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” Natasha replied. Her smile stayed small and enigmatic; by the time he hung his coat on the rack by the door, she’d crossed the room to stand all of two feet in front of him. “Are you hungry?”

she asked.

He felt for a split-second like he'd stepped into the conversation mid-stream. "I could eat?" he answered carefully.

"Good," she returned, and before Bruce could blink, she reached up and kissed him.

Their kisses since they'd decided to start dating rather than falling into bed with one another had all been carefully restrained, at least on his part. He'd calculated the heat and the urgency, trying to prove to Natasha again and again that he cared about her for more than her body. Her body now pressed against him, pinning him to the door, and all his calculations flew out the window as he grabbed her hips and kissed her back just as hard. He'd missed this, he realized in those first heady seconds. He'd missed the *need* pulsing through him, the bare planes of her pale skin, the heat of her fingers and lips instead of his own hand and the water beating down on him from the showerhead. And he wanted—

He wanted *so* many things.

But he also wanted to prove himself, which was why, when Natasha broke away to press her nose against his cheek and pant, he gently pushed her back. His chest rose and fell raggedly as she stared at him, and he dragged fingers through his hair.

"Vindaloo isn't really good reheated."

Natasha's eyes swept down the length of his body, lingering just below his belt buckle. He felt his face and neck warm in a hot red flush. "There are other things I'd rather have right now," she said bluntly.

"And after dinner, we can—"

"Share half-hearted kisses before you run away like you're missing curfew?" she demanded. She rested her hands on her hips, and Bruce glanced at the wall to avoid her eyes. "Are you still attracted to me?"

"What?" he sputtered. "Of course I'm attracted to you. I'm not blind."

"Good. Because I'm still attracted to you." Before Bruce could explain anything else, Natasha reached down and stripped off her t-shirt. He stared at her, first out of surprise and then at the contrast of her pale skin and her black bra. Without his permission, his eyes surveyed the whole of her: her slim shoulders, her full breasts, the soft curve of her hips. He tried to force his gaze back up to her face, but the damage had already been done; her eyes were dark, and she wet her lips expectantly. "Like something you see?"

"Yes," he returned, "but—"

"Let me make this abundantly clear," she continued, almost as though he'd never spoken at all, and she reached for the fly on her jeans. "I am going to take off my clothes and go into my bedroom. You can either join me, or you can eat your vindaloo out here, on your own. It's up to you." She started shoving down her jeans, and Bruce forgot to breathe when he saw that her underwear were tiny, black, and lacy. "But I am not dating you for cheek-kisses and polite hugs goodnight, and if that's what this relationship has to be for you to feel secure, then we're already having problems."

She kicked her jeans and stood there, nearly naked and stealing every one of his breaths away, and Bruce only knew that his self-control had snapped after he grabbed her, shoved her against the door, and kissed her. She moaned into his mouth, loud and helpless, her fingers threading through

his hair and her legs opening to let him between them. He pinned her there, exploring her mouth and swallowing the needy sounds she made as his hands wandered; they relearned the silky-smoothness of her sides, the curve of her hips, the fullness of her thighs, and the way she pressed against him when his fingertips slipped under soft black lace.

“If we don’t have sex tonight,” she panted against his mouth, her one leg hooked around his in a way that almost invited him to pick her up and have her against the front door, “I might actually kill you.”

“We’re having sex,” he told her breathlessly, and dove in for another kiss.

They lost track of time after that; they abandoned minutes, like garments, on the floor of the living room, hallway, and bedroom, until they were both naked on her sheets and Bruce could reassure her of just how much he wanted her. It felt like reclaiming her, a proclamation made with her fingers in his hair or scratching along his shoulders: they were friends, they were fuck-buddies, and now, they were *this*. They were bigger than the sum of their parts, bigger than the little sounds of praise he whispered against her skin as he climbed up the length of her body and turned her pants into gasps, bigger than whatever feelings they’d spent all those months building toward and then avoiding.

This build-up, this climb and then fall, it was a thousand times better than what came before.

But all he could tell her, all that he could say to explain those things, was just a mantra of her name: “Natasha.”

They laid together in silence for a long time afterwards, her curls loose and messy and his heart throbbing in his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair and she rolled against him; he wrapped an arm around her, she settled a leg over his, and they stayed like that, more intimate than they’d maybe ever been.

Sometime later, Natasha commented, “I wasn’t sure that’d work.”

He chuckled and glanced over at her. “I’ve spent weeks dropping you off without getting past what Tony would call ‘first base,’” he replied. “You had me when your shirt came off.”

“Even at the risk of your cold vindaloo?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “We can order a pizza,” he said, and his whole body felt warm when she laughed.

Steve sat in his car and eyed the bouquet of roses in the passenger seat. He’d spent the whole twenty-five minute drive out to Bucky’s apartment debating whether or not they were over the top. Part of his mind screamed that they were too much, but the other part would pick every rose in the county to give to Bucky without a second thought. Which was kind of a pathetic mental image. With a sigh, he grabbed the flowers off the seat and made his way into the apartment building. Over the top or not, they were expensive as hell.

He tried not to seem too eager as he bounded up the steps and completely ignored the glare Bucky’s next door neighbor shot him as the older man stepped out to throw away some garbage. Steve knocked on the door and a harried, “Yeah, it’s open” was his greeting. He eased inside and locked the door behind him before walking into the kitchen.

Bucky was in a white tank top and grey sweatpants, and both had red sauce down the front. He swore in a language that to Steve’s untrained ear sounded like Italian; he set a new mental goal to make Bucky curse like that during other activities. “What’s wrong?”

“Anything that could go wrong did. Had to restart cooking three different things, so now food will be late and I’m a mess,” Bucky answered without turning away from the stovetop where sauce bubbled and sausages hissed.

Steve set the roses down on the counter next to Bucky, rested his hands on the other man’s hips, and brushed a kiss over the red star tattooed on his boyfriend’s upper left arm. Bucky’d told him the story of how all the soldiers in his unit—a group nicknamed Winter Soldiers for getting stranded in the mountains during a blizzard for three days—all had the marking. “I’m sure it’s going to be fine. And besides,” he added his voice dropping down to a near growl, “sweatpants are easier to take off anyway.”

“No,” Bucky reprimanded as he swung around and waved a wooden spoon in a gesture his mother had undoubtedly done to him a number of times, “none of that. I used to be able to cook just fine, and then you showed up with your washboard abs and now I can’t do anything except think about you and the list of dirty, dirty things I want to do to you. It’s all very distracting.”

Steve felt a smirk cross his face. “Just how long is that list?”

“Couch!” Bucky ordered. “Go read a magazine or something so I can finish this and there’s food to eat. Because I have plans, and I’m going to need to carbo load. So, couch.”

He raised his hands in a sign of surrender and backed out of the kitchen. After depositing his leather jacket on an empty hook in the entryway, he meandered around the living room. He’d never really had a chance to poke around; during the first visits here it seemed rude to stare at the family photos everywhere, and during the more recent visits, he’d been otherwise occupied. He stopped and studied each of the photographs, guessing at faces to go with the tales Bucky’d shared with him. On the coffee table there was a picture from college of Bucky, Nat, and a redheaded man; the three of them looked impossibly young.

He was drawn out of his reverie by a kiss to the back of his neck. “Thanks for the flowers,” Bucky whispered.

Steve turned with a shrug. “Happy Valentine’s Day. How’s dinner?”

“Almost ready. I’m going to change into something a little nicer.”

“I’m not sure putting on more clothing can achieve that.”

Bucky pinched his side before moving off to the bedroom. “Stark has absolutely no idea that you’re just as horny as he is, does he?”

Steve chuckled at that and went about setting the dining table. He considered digging around for a couple of candles, but decided to rein in the romantic overdrive. When he walked into the dining room, a surprise was waiting on him. The basket held what looked to be flowers with several items sporting red and pink ribbons inside the wicker container. Upon closer inspection, Steve realized the colorful blossoms were actually condoms and the items in the bottom included lube and a number of toys Steve recognized but had never actually used.

“That’s not for you,” Bucky explained as he came up behind him. “I mean, it can be for you, but it wasn’t specifically meant for you.”

Steve hooked a hot pink, fur-covered handcuff onto his finger and turned to dangle it in front of Bucky, and tried not to lose his train of thought as he took in the half-buttoned white dress shirt and his new favorite pair of jeans on the entire planet. “Are we going to have to come up with a safe

word?”

“How about ‘my sisters are assholes?’ ”

“Few too many syllables for my liking.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and grabbed the handcuffs from Steve before tossing it back in the basket and taking the gift off into the living room. Steve followed his movements just in case things were needed for later. “Their idea of a joke,” Bucky elaborated. “They think they’re hilarious. Never have I ever pulled this kind of shit with them. Well, okay, there was the one time I put a frog in one of their beds, but they pummeled my ass so hard I never thought about doing anything like that again.”

He shrugged. “Some of the things in there looked like fun.”

The comment made Bucky’s jaw literally drop, and he shook his head in an attempt to recover. “Fuck me,” he muttered.

“That’s the plan,” Steve shot back with a smirk.

Bucky’s hands shot out to keep Steve at arm’s length. “You are not allowed to say things like that. I worked my ass off to make a fine meal and I will not let it go to waste with you being all hot. Knock it off.”

Steve laughed. “Sit, I’ll dish up the food. What do you want to drink?”

“Ice water. Very, very cold water.”

Steve threw an arm around Bucky’s waist and nuzzled a kiss to the man’s temple. “Love you,” he mumbled before walking into the kitchen. Halfway through fixing one plate, he realized what he’d said. He froze in fear, a feeling of ice settling in his chest and tried to swallow the panic caused by stupidly admitting those words.

“Steve,” Bucky quietly said behind him. “Steve,” he repeated with a chuckle. “Turn around.” Ever so slowly he turned; the faintest glimmer of hope flickered in his stomach when he saw the smile on Bucky’s face. “How long you been sittin’ on that?”

Steve rolled his lips, afraid the truth would be embarrassingly overwhelming because the realization had been percolating in his mind for weeks, maybe even months. Too soon for it to be rational, but it felt entirely right. “A while,” he answered softly.

Bucky closed the distance between them and placed a kiss on the corner of his mouth. “Love you, too.”

“Oh, you have got to be— Are these refs blind?” Carol Danvers pulled her hand back like she planned on throwing her beer bottle at the TV behind the bar. The bartender ducked out of the way, wide-eyed and terrified, and Rhodey laughed as she lowered the bottle to gesture with it. “I thought I promised you a *good* hockey game.”

“And I thought you said you could handle the ‘dragonfire’ hot wings, but you couldn’t,” he returned, and she rolled her eyes at him as she huffed into her beer.

Truth be told, Rhodey wasn’t usually a fan of hockey. He liked most sports just fine, professional basketball and college football especially, but he’d never really worked out the point of watching a

giant ice-fight where some sports broke out if you were lucky. Even Tony, who liked any sport he could bet on, usually turned up his nose at anything short of the last game of the Stanley Cup.

But ever since the comedy club, he and Carol'd texted back and forth, looking for a time they could get together and plot how to make Tony's life miserable. And they'd scheduled a whole host of meet-ups that fell through; a work disaster'd kept him late and he'd missed out on grabbing a cup of coffee with her, Carol'd lost a filling and cancelled their quick dinner, and they'd *both* accidentally double-booked that night they'd planned on catching a movie.

It turned out that the universe really wanted to keep them apart.

Also, Rhodey'd started to suspect there weren't enough non-romantic synonyms for the word *date* in the English language.

So when Carol'd texted him the day before and suggested they drink beer, eat wings, and watch the Bruins play the Canucks—and who named these teams, by the way?—he'd agreed and waited for the universe to throw some kind of roadblock in their way. He hadn't even really believed Carol'd show up until she materialized through the front door of the sports bar about three minutes after he'd made it there, wearing high boots, skinny jeans, and—

“You might be the first girl I've met who wears her licensed hockey jersey out to the bar,” he commented once the game flipped to commercial, and Carol put down her beer to grin at him. Her blonde hair hung down her back in this wild mane, and he wondered for a second whether she'd let him run his fingers through it. He gripped his own beer bottle and kept the thought to himself.

“You pick up the hockey thing in the service?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Are you kidding? No, my dad loved the Bruins. I don't think we ever missed a game on TV, and once a year, he'd take me and the boys to see them play live.”

“The boys?”

“My brothers.” She waved a hand. “Come on, you told me last time you were a social worker. Unless that was a line to get me interested—”

“Yeah, social work brings *all* the ladies back to my place,” he replied, and grinned when she jabbed him in the side with an elbow.

“—you probably had me pegged for ‘that daughter of a dad who wanted boys’ by the end of the comedy show.” Rhodey ducked his head to sip his beer, but he felt her eyes narrowing in on him. When he glanced over, he flashed her his most innocent smile; she pointed a finger at him. “See?”

“You threatened to arm-wrestle me,” he pointed out.

“And I still will, sometime,” she retorted, and then flagged the bartender for another drink. He slid off the stool, ready to excuse himself for a second, but she reached out and grabbed his arm. Her fingers bit a little into his skin, and for the first time, he thought maybe Tony had a point about how he needed to meet a girl one of these days.

“You want anything while you're up?” Carol asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

He grinned at her. “You mean besides you trying one of those hot wings?”

“There is hot, and then there is *my tastebuds mean nothing to me*, Rhodes.”

“And there’s being a wimp, Danvers,” he countered smoothly, and laughed as she flipped him off while he headed to the men’s room.

He was washing his hands and minding his own business when another one of the guys from the bar came into the bathroom, cell phone plastered to his ear and a look of raw terror on his face. “No, Megan, I know— I *know*,” he stressed, and Rhodey tried not to watch him pace around the room as he reached for the paper towels. “Look, it’s like I said, work’s been a real pain in the ass lately. How the hell was I supposed to remember it was Valentine’s Day when— Megan, you gotta hear me out here, baby—”

Five feet away from the guy, Rhodey could hear Megan screeching on the other end of the line, but he no longer cared. No, what he cared about was that, somehow, he and Carol’d finally met up again on Valentine’s Day in what had to be the most aggressively non-date setting on the planet. He hadn’t even thought to change out of his work slacks and button-down, because he’d figured—

What the hell had he figured, anyway? Tony’d already called him on “digging” Carol. What was the point of trying to hide it from her?

When he made it back to the bar, he discovered that Carol’d stolen all the celery sticks out of their basket of wings and was now eating them with a heavy dose of ranch. She’d also replaced his beer. “I’m ashamed,” she said as he reclaimed his stool. “I thought my team’d win and—” She paused as she glanced at him, frowning. “You okay?”

He blinked at her. “I’m fine.”

“You look like you got bad news in the bathroom.”

He chuckled. “Not unless you count watching some guy get reamed out for forgetting Valentine’s Day.”

Carol snorted and rolled her eyes. “Here’s my theory about Valentine’s Day,” she said after a couple seconds, celery stick suspended between two fingers. “If you want to be with someone, you should just tell them. Not because Hallmark’s plastered pink paper everywhere, but because it’s how you feel.” Her eyes searched his, and he watched her press her full lips into a tight line. “Not everyone wants flowers and chocolate.”

He cracked a tiny grin. “Will they settle for beer and hot wings?”

“Not *those* hot wings, thanks,” she retorted, and pushed the basket back at him while he laughed.

It turned out, the Bruins lost the hockey game by three goals and, according to Carol, *shamed the city of Boston in ways I don’t even want to talk about*.

It also turned out that, when Rhodey kissed her in the parking lot, she followed it up with a sigh and a soft, “Tony can never know he was right.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” Rhodey informed her, his thumb smoothing a crease in her Bruins jersey.

“He’ll know,” Carol replied, and kissed him on the corner of the mouth before leaving him to head for her car.

Odinhistory

Chapter Notes

the_wordbutler and I had a lot of feels after seeing *Thor 2*, so this is the back story for the Odin clan in the 180 Days 'verse.

No one remembered what set off that particular round of epic shouting between Thor and his father. It could've been how he'd gotten into yet another fight at school, not even bothering to come home after partying with his friends the night before, or his reckless driving in his pick-up truck. But whatever set things off, it caused the worst blow-up between son and father any of them'd seen, and the result was one none of them would forget.

Thor remembered getting up in his father's face, both of them shouting as loudly as possible. Loki, three years younger than him and a wisp of a ninth grader, was on one side of them calmly telling Thor that he needed to stop and take a deep breath; his mother was on the other side doing the same to her husband. They were both ignored.

All noise ceased when Thor's father let out a guttural growl sharp enough that everyone shut up and took a step back. "You have defied me for the last time," he said. "You are no longer welcome in this home, and no longer part of this family. I am done with you."

"What are you doing?" Frigga'd hissed. "Don't you dare—"

"Silence!"

Thor felt his chest swell in anger once more. "Don't you yell at her like that."

"I am done with you!" his father repeated in a shout. "Get out of my house, and do not return."

Thor huffed bitterly before turning to his right. "Brother, you said you never had the chance to be the favorite son. Well, here you are."

"Don't do this," Loki softly begged. "You've merely set off his temper. Let him regain his wits, and—"

"I will not allow you to banish my son from my home," his mother simultaneously informed his father.

Mother and younger son continued to try and repair the damage while Thor and his father stared each other down, but it was too late. Thor watched the older, one-eyed man inhale deeply to bellow yet another order at all of them and decided to beat him to the punch. Thor spun on his heel and stalked out of the house; he slammed the front door closed behind him with so much force he heard something fall off the wall and break. It was the only thing he felt guilty about.

He climbed into his old pick-up and peeled off, driving on instinct with no particular destination in mind. Eventually he found himself at the state park his family camped at when he was young—and where his friends went on the weekend to hide some of their less-than-legal activities. He spent a good fifteen minutes pretending a sturdy tree trunk was his poor excuse of a father, kicking and

punching till he was gasping for air and his knuckles were bloody. He then collapsed in the bed of his truck and watched the sky fade into pinks and purples.

It was dark when Sif found him; he heard her beater of a car from a mile away. He didn't bother tracking her movements, nor did he look at her when she climbed into the bed of the truck and stood over him. "What are we going to do with you?" she asked.

"I am not in a gaming mood," he growled back.

"What happened?" she asked with a sigh as she sat down next to him, folding herself into a ball. Her black hair, tied back in a ponytail, moved gently in the breeze.

"You're here; I'm assuming Mother called you to go look for me."

"It's a possibility."

"Then you already know what happened."

"True," she answered, "but I want to hear your side of it."

"My father is uncomfortable with mirrors," he muttered. "Any fault in my behavior—my temper, my wildness, my stubbornness—was inherited from him and he is incapable of seeing that or acknowledging it. He wants me to take over the banks when I am older, claims to be grooming me for it, but every time I mess up, he throws in my face how my errors will force the family and our business into ruin. Like a seventeen-year-old can bring down a chain of banks singlehandedly," he muttered. "He's supposed to parent, not belittle me every opportunity he gets."

She sat silently next to him for a while before speaking. "Come stay with me," she offered. "You can have Heimdall's room while he's away at college."

He arched his eyebrows at her, "I think everyone in your home knows that if I spend the night, I share your bed." He grazed a hand along her hip as a reminder.

"Yes," she said with an eye roll. "You have no idea how much that pleases my father and brother."

"As long as I make sure to please you, I really don't think you mind."

She sighed and shook her head, causing her ponytail to swish gently back and forth along her back. "C'mon, let's go home. Some of us actually care about the history test in the morning and would like to go study."

"I have no clothes, barely any money. I'm fairly certain that if my father kicked me out of the house, he will also ensure that I will not have a job at our banks anymore. I do not want to be a burden to your family."

"Thor, your mother dropped off clothing to last you a few days. I'm sure if you rifle through the pockets of your pants, you will find she left you cash to get by. And if she didn't, I'm sure your little brother will smuggle it into school tomorrow and give it to you then." She patted him on the chest, a sign for him to get up and moving, but he caught her small hands in his. "You aren't not going to mope here all night long. I will call your mother."

He sighed and sat up. "Your parents are alright with me staying in your home?"

She nodded. "It will be fine. All of it will work out." She ran a hand along his cheek. "Seventeen-year-olds get kicked out of the house all the time," Sif told him gently, her voice a delightfully

gravely tone that developed even before she started sneaking cigarettes in the bathroom at school. “It is not the end of the world.”

He waited until she returned to her car before he muttered, “That is not what this feels like.”

“We are going to get arrested!” she protested, laughing, but Thor just wrapped his arms around her waist and dragged her down the beach, closer to the water.

The lake a mile away from the college campus always felt forbidden at night, especially in the cool haze of autumn. During August, every sorority, fraternity, and on-campus organization hosted barbeques and picnics on the sand; in the spring, Rush Week usually saw at least three half-drowned freshmen puking up muddy water in the parking lot. But in the fall, once the initial head rush of returning to campus died down, no one really headed out to the lake except during the daytime hours, and most of them were dog-walkers and joggers.

That’s how Jane’d and Thor’d first run into one another, actually: she’d shucked her shoes and walked along the sand, reading a physics journal, and he’d jogged with his iPod blaring something loud and annoying. And they’d literally run into each other, Jane landing on her ass in the wet sand and her journal splashing into a watery grave.

She remembered peering up at him, golden and bronze like a god in the September sun. He’d helped her up, stammering and apologizing, and offered to replace the journal that’d already been swept away on the gentle waves.

“It’s the International Journal of Applied Physics,” she’d told him, and he’d stared at her blankly. “It— Never mind, it’s not important.”

“I will remember your International Journal of impossibly complicated names,” he’d replied, and something about his smile’d climbed right into her stomach, “and I will replace it.”

She never figured out how he’d found her study carrel in the physics building, never mind a copy of the journal to leave there. All she knew was that, when he’d appeared on the front steps to the building three days later and asked how she enjoyed her articles, she’d wanted to climb him like a tree.

For scientific purposes.

Look, even future astrophysicists needed to pursue other, broad-shouldered, golden-haired interests, all right?

The moon reflected off the lake as she wriggled out of Thor’s grip and ran across the sand, barefoot and clumsy. His laughter echoed into the night sky, booming like thunder; closer to the path up to the parking lot, their meager beach campfire threw off sparks. Thor’d been the one to suggest a moonlight picnic consisting mostly of beer, and she’d agreed for reasons she couldn’t quite explain. They laid in the darkness, alternating stories with kisses and long sips from bottles, and Jane’d started to feel funny. Not drunk or heady like when she ran across the sand, but almost—lost.

Like falling endlessly into a black hole, never knowing when she’d land.

Of course, from an astronomical standpoint, that was impossible, because—

“Thor!” she shrieked, and Thor laughed as he hoisted her up onto his shoulder. She kicked him lightly, squirming in his grip, but he gripped her legs tighter. “We are already close enough to

getting thrown in jail without adding skinny dipping to the mix!”

“The water is warm,” he informed her. She craned her neck, watching as the shore came closer. “If you protest once you’re in it, we’ll climb out.”

“In wet clothes?”

“I will not throw you in, Jane. Have more faith in me than *that*.” She twisted in his arms, ready to protest, but he shifted his grip and started to lower her down into the gentle, splashing waves. The last two weeks had been usually warm, and the water was pleasant, a contrast to the slight chill of the September evening. Thor set her down in the sand at a place where the water only just met the ends of her jeans, and then kissed her. He kissed like they had all the time in the world, slow and leisurely, and Jane ran her fingers through his hair as though it would allow her to climb inside him.

She wanted to be all around him, two parts of the same whole.

“Not too cold, is it?” he asked against her mouth.

She sighed and shook her head. “You’re paying our bail,” she warned him, and then pulled off her t-shirt and threw it onto the beach. In the moonlight, she could see Thor watching her with eager eyes. “Pleased with yourself?” she asked, reaching to unhook her bra.

“When it comes to you, always,” he replied, and the earnestness in his voice made her stomach flutter.

He let her step into the water first, his eyes at her back as she waded in to her knees, her hips, her breasts, and as much as she usually blushed under his attention, in that moment, she loved it. She loved the power of it, the way it turned her not into an absent-minded girl from the physics department (one of three women in her year and major) but into a sea creature, strong and proud and beautiful. When she was finally submerged to her shoulders, her toes curly in the muddy sand at her feet, she twisted to see Thor still standing on the shore. He was shirtless but otherwise clothed, staring at her.

She brushed her hair out of her face. “What?” she asked.

“You are magnificent beyond compare,” he said, sounding almost breathless, and that lost feeling from before tangled around Jane until she forgot that there was a complicated universe beyond Thor Odinson.

When he did follow her into the water, it was to gather her up and kiss her, to hold her close and stroke his big fingers over her skin like he’d forgotten the universe, too. And even though she only ever murmured his name against his mouth, she imagined they were other phrases like *you’re reckless*.

Or you’re wonderful.

Or I love you.

“And now you’ve brought another of your ‘girlfriends’ home to meet the parents, have you?” Loki asked, and Thor clenched his jaw to resist punching his brother.

For nearly a week, he had debated whether to invite Jane to his mother’s birthday party, fretting idly while attempting to study for a few of his junior year spring midterms. He’d paced his dormitory, nearly driving his roommates mad; he’d called Heimdall at least a half-dozen times,

only to listen to him laugh.

“You are bringing her home, not asking her to marry you,” Heimdall’d said every time, and every time, Thor’d grumbled in annoyance. “Your parents will think it’s a good sign.”

“My parents and I are only starting to mend our wounds, and if this opens them up further—”

“I can’t imagine a scenario where bringing over the girl you’re clearly in love with would further open up those wounds,” Heimdall’d challenged, and Thor’d fallen silent at that.

Of course, once he asked Jane, she’d smiled and accepted. And of course, once she was in the house, surrounded by rambunctious cousins who wanted to understand her studies . . .

Loki sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “You know, it is clever, trying to charm them with an intelligent one,” he said dryly, and Thor curled his hands into fists at his side. “Invest in something a bit different from usual, lull them into a false sense of security—”

“Listen well, brother, because there is no false sense from anyone other than you—”

“—and then dispose of her as you did all those other girls after you and Sif finally broke up.” Loki shook his head. “And to think that Father is starting to think you aren’t still the same idiot he kicked out all those years—”

“Is this your brother?” a voice behind them asked, and Thor nearly leapt out of his skin as he turned around to see Jane hovering nearby. She touched his arm gently and he reached for her, settling his hand on her small waist. Loki worked very hard to hide his eye roll, barely succeeding. “Loki, right? I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Funny, since I’ve hardly heard anything about you,” Loki replied smoothly. Thor narrowed his eyes, but his brother simply flashed one of his winning smiles and reached out to squeeze Jane’s hand. “Except for your fondness for astrophysics, which my brother does not understand.”

Jane chuckled. “Not many people do,” she admitted, and Thor smiled as he watched Loki struggle for a comeback. “Thor said you’re interested in history once you graduate?” She paused for a moment and pointedly met his eyes. “You’re a senior in high school, right?”

Thor fought for a moment to hold back his laugh but lost the battle. Loki glared at him for a moment, his eyes flashing, and then swept off to sulk in a different part of the living room. When Jane smiled up at him, it was so full of warmth that Thor nearly pulled her into a kiss right there, friends and relatives be damned. “You are a gift to the universe,” he told her.

“Because I can deal with your little brother?”

“With a wit as quick as his, and twice as sharp.”

“A startling compliment,” another voice weighed in, and Thor lifted his eyes to see his father standing before him. He straightened his shoulders almost involuntarily, raising his chin, and his father nodded to him. The wounds of the last several years still felt fresh, sometimes; at other times, Thor swore he could feel them healing. Heimdall’s constant encouragements and a promise of an internship once he finished his degree helped, too. “I’m sorry that my wife’s sister trapped me in a conversation,” Thor’s father continued, offering Jane a hand. “She could talk for a few hundred years if we let her.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve seen Thor do the same thing,” Jane replied, shaking his hand. Thor tried not to puff out his chest with pride as his father smiled. “You have a beautiful home. It definitely lives up

to Thor's stories."

"I hope he only shares the flattering ones."

"They mostly have to do with stealing his mom's cookies, actually." His father laughed, and Thor caught the pleased little sparkle touching Jane's eyes. "And," she added, her tone lifting in mischief, "he skipped all the embarrassing stories about when he and his brother used to get into trouble as kids."

Thor grimaced, a word of warning about to leave his lips, but his father laughed again. "If those are the stories you want, then *I* can talk for a hundred years," he replied. Before Thor could protest, the man offered Jane his arm and began to lead her away, already promising to show her the banister Thor once broke with his head.

Thor sighed, about to follow them, but a soft hand touched his wrist. When he glanced over his shoulder, his mother smiled warmly; however, her raised eyebrows suggested that he could better serve his interests by staying in place. "Leave them be," she said once he frowned at her. "Let him get to know her without you hovering."

"I have no idea what he might tell her."

"If Jane's not figured out your reckless heart by now, she's not the girl you keep telling us about." He felt color flood his cheeks and cast his eyes out at the rest of the party, watching as two of his younger cousins chased after one another, laughing. "And I hope you did not take too much stock in what Loki said, either."

Thor snorted. "I did not need his reminder about the last few girls I dated," he grumbled. His mother tipped her head at him, and he sighed. "Jane is unlike anyone I've ever met," he explained after a few seconds. "She is brilliant, sometimes reasonable to a fault, and when I'm with her I feel —"

He shook his head and glanced at the floor when the words escaped him, but beside him, his mother chuckled. She touched his cheek and he raised his chin to meet her calm, knowing gaze. "I have met some of the girls you've dated and heard about the others," she said quietly, "and none of them have left you as lost—or as speechless—as Jane Foster." She paused, smiling. "And more than that, none of them have ever kept up with you like she can, either."

He rolled his eyes at her, but he knew his smile betrayed any attempt to feign annoyance. "You've hardly spoken to her. How can you know whether that's true?"

"You haven't been able to render Loki speechless since he was twelve, and she did it in thirty seconds," his mother responded, and kissed him on the cheek before walking across the party to join her husband—and Thor's magnificent Jane.

It didn't take long for Jane to recognize where Thor's detour on the way to the restaurant was taking them. She remembered him driving her out to the large expanse of land the first time, where he staked the claim that his fledgling construction company would build a subdivision of houses. While Jane had spent the last three years working on her combination Masters-PhD program in astrophysics, Thor'd been working at the construction company Heimdall helped run. He'd started at the grunt level and quickly rose through the ranks, gaining trade secrets and contacts along the way. Six months ago, he'd struck out on his own and talked Heimdall into coming with him as his right-hand man. They'd worked tirelessly to gain just enough of a reputation to hold some water, and with the help of Thor's father and his capital and influence, the men were able to win a bid to

develop a small neighborhood in a rapidly expanding portion of town.

Thor pulled his oversized truck off the main road and began driving it as far into the field as he could before putting the vehicle into park and climbing out. He turned back with a smile and waved Jane out of the pick-up. She sighed and shook her head, wondering if Thor remembered just how high her heels were. Apparently it didn't matter, because he laughed, waved again, and said, "Come, I have something to show you."

"I've seen the field before."

"Not this particular part of it, you haven't."

She made her way out of the truck and tried her best—and failed—not to shoot a dirty look at her longtime boyfriend as her stiletto heels sunk into the soft earth. "You do remember why we're going out tonight, right? Me being almost done with my dissertation. Which means I've been ignoring food, as you've been so kind to remind me, for the last three years. I'm starving; can we please do this another time?"

She watched something that almost resembled nervousness cross over his face. It was hard to be sure if that was what the emotion truly was because it was rare for Thor to have self-doubt. "Please, Jane," he pleaded, his voice barely audible over the traffic behind them and the crickets in the field.

"I can't walk in this dirt."

He smiled at that. "Luckily, I have rather large arms." Without warning, he walked over and scooped her up before trekking out to the back left corner of the field.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he made his way through the tall grass.

"You'll see."

"You promised me steak."

"In good time," he chuckled. "There is something I want you to see first."

A few minutes later, he gently sat her down on the ground. She looked around in the fading light, but there was nothing other than a small plastic flag typically used to mark underground wires or sewer lines to distinguish why this was such an important spot. "So what is this?"

"Our future home," he answered. "If you wish."

Her eyebrows rose. "You want to build us a house? In the suburbs?"

"I know we'd discussed living in the city, but I want to raise my children in a home that I built with my own hands. Here," he beckoned as he took her hand. Thor slowly pulled her along, being mindful about her delicate shoes, as he walked her through the layout of what their home would be. "Something with four bedrooms, and one of those being an office," he swore. "I know your limit is two children."

She listened as he described the kitchen and open-plan main level, the basement where the children would go when they're behaving like mad, the deck where they could host parties, and the backyard where he could build her a fire pit. "What do you think?" he asked when he was done with the grand tour.

“I think we’re going to have a lot of knocks on our door if the neighbors find out that you’re the one who built their house and their air conditioning goes out in the middle of the night.”

His eyes bugged slightly at the comment. “I had not considered that,” he muttered. “I will give them Heimdall’s number in that case.” She snorted at that, causing that easy grin that made her stomach flip-flop to appear on his face. Thor took her hands in his and repeated the question. “What do you think?”

Her gut instinct was to make a throw-away comment, something that would appease him and get them on the way to the restaurant as soon as possible. But again something flashed in his eyes; something strong enough to make her stop and fully focus her attention on him. “I think I would miss the city, but if this is what you want, then okay.”

“If you want to stay downtown, we could do that. I do not want to force you into a life you do not want.”

Jane pulled one hand free to rest on the side of his face. He tilted his cheek into the contact and brushed a quick kiss onto her palm. “As long as you’re with me, I’ll be fine.”

Thor’s entire being brightened at her response. “That makes me feel slightly more confident in doing this.” He kept his grip on her left hand as he knelt down in the dirt before her. “Jane Foster, you have been a constant source of hope and joy in my life. You have helped me grow from an angry boy into a less-angry man. I cannot imagine anything other than spending the rest of my days at your side. Will you please do me the honor of letting me be your husband?”

She felt her jaw drop at the proposal and the world seemed to tilt a little as he pulled a ring box out of his pocket. They’d been together for years, certainly talked about marriage and a family, but she still hadn’t expected this.

“Jane?” Thor prodded gently when she didn’t immediately answer.

She tried to imagine life without him, but she couldn’t. Her brain couldn’t conjure an existence without his booming laugh, his dirty laundry strewn about (right alongside hers), his chest to rest her head on as she fell asleep, him bringing her coffee in the early hours of the morning. Her life had ceased being only hers and she had no desire to change that.

“Yes. Yes, of course, Thor.”

He let out a whoop that carried across the field before sweeping her up in his arms and twirling her around in the air. “You have made me so very happy,” he said in her ear before capturing her lips with his.

When she pulled away, a small voice that started niggling in the back of her mind during his tour of the layout of their future home grew too loud to be ignored. “Not that I’m going to take anything back that I just agreed to,” she started as he slipped the ring on her finger, “but those kids you talked about...”

He grinned at her. “I’ve had the timeline of your professional goals recited to me enough to know that those bedrooms won’t be needed for a few years, at least. And I swear to do everything on my part to keep true to that.”

“Just so we’re clear,” she said with a smile before reaching up for another kiss.

Thor nuzzled his nose against the fuzz atop Goran’s head a moment before placing a barely-there

kiss to the top of his head and placing him in the crib. He watched over the three-month-old a moment as the baby twitched before settling back into a deep sleep. In the room down the hall, Henrik was dreaming in his own crib. The not-quite two-year-old had gone down miraculously easy this evening, one of the few breaks Thor'd had that day.

He snuck into his and Jane's bedroom to grab a baby monitor in case either son decided to wake up while he accomplished his next task. Making his way downstairs, he wove between furniture and around toys to come to the back door. Beyond the deck, he could make out Jane's small figure huddled in front of the roaring firepit. Thor debated on how much alone time to give her; Jane escaping to her special place to think was not uncommon. It happened when she couldn't figure out a piece of her research, when she needed a break from the kids, or when she needed a break from Thor. She'd already been out there for an hour, and despite being bundled up in one of Thor's fleece jackets, the December wind was still bitterly cool.

Settling on his decision, he grabbed a fleece of his own, double-checked the monitor clipped to his back pocket and made his way outside into the yard. His mind began, as it always did, to list the additions he wanted to make to their home: a swingset in the back corner of the yard and perhaps room for a garden. There were originally plans someday for a doghouse, but Thor had a feeling that he'd be the only one living there at the moment.

"May I join you?" he asked. She gave a barely perceptible nod and he sat his large frame into the lawn chair next to hers. "I know you're feeling overwhelmed," he started.

She expelled her breath in a bitter puff of air. "I just got back from maternity leave and now I have to ask them for another one? How is anyone going to take my research seriously when I can never work on it because I'm too busy having kids?"

Thor looked down on his hands as he twisted his wedding band around his finger. Despite the bitter tone seeping into his wife's voice, he knew it was based more in fear than anger, and he couldn't blame her. She'd always said two children was her limit, and while he would've been happy for more, he wanted her to be happy. Three days ago, Jane began to show symptoms like nausea and aversions to smells. She'd given in and gone to the store to pick up a couple pregnancy tests a few hours earlier; both came back positive.

He felt guilty. Thor knew this wasn't the life she would've picked out for herself. She'd never wanted to leave the city, probably never saw herself actually getting married. She'd been firm on the idea of only two children, and now Thor felt like he'd lied and cheated. "I'm sorry," he breathed, the two words not seeming nearly enough to convey the emotions churning in his stomach.

Jane shrugged. "Takes two to tango."

He nodded. "I promise this was not some ploy to try and have a daughter."

She chuckled at that. "I know. Maybe life decided you absolutely needed a girl and my plans be damned. Although, if it's another boy, I really need to invest in full-body protection gear in order to raise my own children."

Thor smiled at that as he slowly reached over to take her hand; she gripped his tightly. "You are not the only one terrified by this," he admitted. That was what it took for her to look over at him finally, and it hurt to see the tears in her eyes. "Three children under the age of three? There will be cribs and diapers as far as they eye can see. And they'll be so tiny and fragile. I suppose they'll always be fragile," he muttered.

"I'll quit my job," Jane said after a moment of shared silence.

"No, you will not."

Jane shook her head. "I don't know if we can afford three kids in daycare yet, and you're the one with the successful career at the moment. It makes more sense."

"You'll be miserable, and you know it."

His comment caused her chin to go to her chest and he felt a new wave of guilt wash over him.

"I'm not supposed to hate the idea of being a stay-at-home mom," she said quietly, tears evident in her voice. "But I do. What does that say about me?"

"It says you have a fierce amount of intelligence that deserves to be shared with the world."

Jane snorted and rolled her eyes. "It says I'm a terrible mother. Especially since I'm sitting here crying over the fact that I'm going to have a baby that I don't want." Her hands clamped over her mouth as soon as she said the words. "Oh, that makes me sound like the worst person ever."

He rose from his seat to kneel beside her chair, careful not to block the heat from the fire in front of her. "You are scared and overwhelmed; there is a difference. Jane, I am thrilled you are the mother of my children. I want my sons to have a strong, smart, independent woman help raise them. Because I want them to have wives like you someday. And goodness knows, it will take a strong woman to raise boys with the name Odinson." He gently pulled her up to standing, and she stepped forward to press her body against the front of his. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose into the top of her head.

"You promise you're scared, too?" she asked.

"Terrified beyond words. But," he reassured as he placed kiss in her hair, "I am certain we will survive this together."

"Mama, the boys are being mean!"

"Are not!"

"George is, but I'm not!"

"Are *not*!"

"Mama, make them stop!"

Feet thundered down the hallway, and sitting at the kitchen table, Jane sighed. The February day outside was dark, dreary, and frigid, but she considered shoving the kids out into the yard anyway, just to earn five minutes' peace. But playing in the cold never lasted for very long, and the last thing she wanted to do was fight over boots and missing mittens.

Alva skidded into the kitchen, her brothers on her heels and one of her stuffed ponies in her grip. She was teary-eyed, and Jane shot a warning look to her two boys. "What are you three doing?" she asked, and at least Henry had sense to flinch at her stern tone.

"Nothing," the boys answered in unison. Alva said nothing, but she forced herself under her mother's arm and pushed her face into her chest.

Jane sighed. She'd asked Thor a week ago for one Saturday's peace so she could finish up a

presentation for an upcoming conference, and he'd been good as his word until a water main burst at the new development he'd devoted the last three months to working on. Loki was in seclusion working on his thesis, Darcy and her mother were in the middle of another knock-down drag out that Jane dared not interrupt, and nobody else Jane knew could really drop everything and spend an afternoon with the kids.

She'd considered bringing them into the office and playing them a movie on her laptop while she worked on her office computer, but then George'd knocked an enormous bucket of Legos off the shelf and onto the floor and she'd decided against it.

Leaving her in the house with a pile of work to do and three rambunctious, stir-crazy—

“Mom!” Henry protested suddenly, and Jane jerked herself out of her thoughts just as George pulled his fingers away from his brother's ear. If she ever figured out who'd taught her sons about “wet willies,” she would break their index fingers off. “He won't stop doing it—”

“I did not!” George protested.

“—and it's *gross*, and it makes Alva kick him—”

“He *started* it!” Alva shrilled, nearly crying.

“—and—”

“That is it!” Jane announced. She slammed down her hands harder on the table than she meant to, and all three of her children flinched. “Get your coats on, we're leaving.”

Alva peered up at her over her pony's head. “To where?”

“I don't know yet, but we can't stay here,” Jane informed her, and then bodily nudged her toward the mud room.

They ended up at McDonalds, eating Happy Meals and then leaving Jane the leftovers (consisting mostly of apple slices and the ketchupy remnants of a burger) to climb all over the PlayPlace. Jane ignored the glares of the other mother in the room and worked through a few of her PowerPoint slides on her tablet for the first twenty minutes; then, Alva got bored and climbed down to sit with her and “watch the ponies.” When their stay became too conspicuous to the employees who kept wandering by to check in and the boys started complaining that the slide wasn't fun anymore, they piled back into the car and headed to the mall.

Jane reviewed a few quotes she wanted to add to her slides while the kids scaled the play area there—and then put her tablet away to ride the carousel more times than was probably healthy for any of them.

The kids were drained enough that they agreed to watch a movie when they got back to the house, so Jane threw in *Tangled*, turned down the lights, and slunk into the other room to finally finish up her project. An hour into the movie, Alva was asleep and the boys were close.

An hour and ten minutes into the movie, around the time she was proofreading her slides, her cell phone chimed. *We have triumphed over the pipe*, Thor's text read, and she rolled her eyes even as she smiled. *Do we still have three living children?*

Barely, she replied.

How can I apologize for your ruined day?

Just bring home a pizza, she returned. *To start.*

I certainly do not intend to leave it at a pizza, Thor responded, complete with a winking emoticon. Jane laughed and shook her head before going back to work.

Thor banged through the door at just before six, waking up all three dozing children and starting the usual choruses of *Daddy!* and *Guess what we did today!* Jane smiled at the noise as she saved and closed her document; as much as they'd driven her crazy all of two hours earlier, she'd started to feel ill at ease in the quiet. She'd worried about leaving the city because she thought she'd miss all the activity and life there. Lucky that Thor'd given her a whole different kind of activity to sink her teeth into.

She was powering down her laptop when, suddenly, a bouquet of gorgeous pink roses appeared in front of her. She twisted around to see a smiling Thor looming over her shoulder. "The start of my apology," he said, his voice warm and sweet.

She worked very hard to narrow her eyes. "I said pizza."

"Daddy brought pizzas, too!" George reported. Thor's eyes twinkled, and Jane moved the flowers out of the way so she could tug him down to her level by his t-shirt without ruining them. "Three of them, and he said one is the kind with the pineapples on it and— Oh, ew!"

"Ew!" Henry echoed. "Don't *kiss!* Kissing's gross!"

"And for girls!" George added.

Jane finally had to break away from her husband to laugh, her forehead resting against his shoulder. "I enjoy kissing your mother, and I am no girl," Thor told the boys. When Jane peeked out at them, she discovered that they were both making disgusted faces. "Perhaps you simply must learn to kiss."

"No!" Henry protested, and ducked behind George. Thor opened his arms and puckered up, and suddenly, both boys shot out of the kitchen. Their father followed, his loud smooching sounds audible even over the boys begging him not to kiss them.

Hovering next to the table, her pony still in her grip, Alva looked up at her mother. "I like it when you and Daddy kiss," she reported.

Jane chuckled and drew her into a hug. "Good. I'm glad."

"But you don't have to do it *all* the time," she suggested, and grinned when Jane ruffled her mess of curly hair.

Those Days That Never End

Chapter Notes

Macy and Devon Garrison, along with their grandfather, first appear in Chapter 4, “Meetings Galore.” They are the children whose mother left them with their grandfather and ran off.

“My daughter came home and took them,” he said, worrying his handkerchief in his hands. “And I don’t know what to do.”

Pepper sighed and sat forward in her chair, folding her hands on her desk. Mister Garrison looked mostly like he had during their last meeting, but tired. His drawn face and pursed lips told the story of long nights; when he reached up and rubbed the side of his face, it emphasized the deep lines there. Pepper considered circling the desk to sit beside him.

But he looked like he planned to say more, though, so she didn’t.

To be fair, Tony had been the first person to notice something “off” about the Garrison children, Macy and Devon, although he’d described it with all his usual, grace, tact, and specificity. “They’re just, I dunno, not quite right,” he’d said over dinner one night, flapping a hand distractedly. She’d raised an eyebrow at him. “They’re distracted, for one. For two, they’re dirty.”

“Dirty?”

“Mildly unwashed.” She’d wrinkled her nose, and he’d responded by rolling his eyes. “Not in a smelly, dirt-caked way,” he’d clarified. “Just in a— Remember that time I fixed the water pump in the crawl space and you wouldn’t kiss me until I showered three times?”

She’d cocked her head at him. “Tony, you *broke* the sump pump,” she’d reminded him. He’d huffed into his burger. “And you smelled like sewage for two days.”

“You need a less-sensitive nose,” he’d countered. She’d sighed at that and resumed stabbing her salad. But Tony’s comments snuck under her skin, and a few seconds later, she’d found herself glancing over at him. He must have expected it, because he’d shrugged. “My point,” he’d finished, complete with another hand-flap, “is that something’s up.”

“Or kids get dirty,” she’d said, but she’d skepticism slinking into her tone.

“Not stale third-day t-shirt dirty,” Tony’d countered. “Not when somebody cares about those kids.”

Macy and Devon had missed the next two school days after that conversation. On the third, Pepper had called their grandfather, and he’d gone very quiet before asking if he could come in for a conversation.

He glanced up from the handkerchief and met her eyes across her desk. “I don’t know what happens next,” he admitted with a small shake of his head. “I haven’t seen her since she picked them up. Diane’s forgotten to bring them to school before, but now, she’s not answering my phone calls. I’ve driven past where she said her boyfriend lived, but the place is empty. She’s not at her own apartment, or my house, and I—”

His voice thickened, and he pressed his lips together. Pepper forced a small smile. “Have you talked to anyone else about this?” she asked gently.

“What do I say?” he asked. He glanced back down at her hands. “I considered calling that Mister Rhodes you recommended when Diane first took off—he was a good man, helped me get everything together for the kids—but how do I explain that my daughter took off with her kids to somewhere and that I don’t trust her to take good care of them?” He released a shaky breath. “Do you know how many times she came around to see them since our last conversation, ma’am? ‘Cause I do, and the number’s not enough for two growing kids who love their mama. And then she comes home, screaming about how I stole her babies . . .”

He trailed off, shaking his head again. Pepper watched his throat work before she asked, “Do you know where she would have gone?”

“No,” he answered immediately. “She’s always promised them the moon, of course—they’ll move to Hawaii, they’ll go visit Disneyland, they’ll travel around the world, but that’s all pipe dreams.” His mouth twitched into a small, sad smile. “Back at Christmas, you know, Macy asked Santa for three things: her mother to come around more, a bedroom at my house so we’re not always going between, and one of those Pillow Pet things.” Sadness flashed across his face. “Managed the Pillow Pet.”

Something about his tone crawled into the pit of Pepper’s stomach, and she pushed to her feet. She crossed her small office to sit in the chair next to him and lightly put her hand on his arm. “Listen to me,” she said, her voice low but also firm. He raised his eyes to meet hers. “There is nothing wrong with helping Diane help herself. You care about her children, and about her. And if caring means you need to contact Mister Rhodes or anyone else about what is happening, then that’s what you need to do.”

The ghost of a smile nudged at his mouth. “Do you have children, ma’am?”

The question caught her off-guard, and she blinked. “No,” she admitted, “I don’t.”

“Well, if you ever do, you’ll find out that sometimes, you don’t know what to do for them.”

Pepper smiled. “I do know a few things about that,” she replied, and squeezed his arm.

After the end of the school day, her fingers in her hair as she attempted to update the notes she kept on her meetings with students and other family members, her door opened. By the time she glanced up, Tony’d fallen into one of her chairs, draping himself over it at odd angles. She smiled at him. “I thought your e-mail said you had three hours of server updates to suffer through.”

“Got bored,” he reported. He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and started fiddling with it, all while she watched. “But feel free to keep working your psychological magic. It’s not like I don’t still have three hundred levels of Candy Crush to conquer.”

She rolled her eyes. “Darcy should never have showed you that game.”

“Showed? No, showing is fine. Darcy challenged my honor as a man and an engineer in saying I couldn’t catch up to her in three weeks. It’s now on like Donkey Kong.”

She laughed a little and returned to her paper work, but not for long. The tinny music from the game distracted her, as did Tony’s little noises of frustration. Or so she claimed. She didn’t want to admit, at least not too loudly, that the real distraction was her own thoughts—and her continued need to check her phone to see if Rhodey had texted her back.

After another twenty minutes, she said, “I’m ready to go.” Tony practically vaulted out of his chair as she rose. She expected him to burst out of the room and head to get his things in the computer lab, but when she stepped around the desk, he caught her by the hip. Within seconds, she found herself wrapped in his arms, hugging him back.

“You know you do everything you can on days like this, right?” he asked quietly, and she turned her head to look at him. He shrugged lightly. “When things go wrong or people need you, you do everything you can for them up to the point where they have to act. Which is kind of the best you can do, if you think about it.”

She watched him for a moment, then pressed her lips together. “Darcy told you that Mister Garrison came in?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “But just the fact of his showing up,” he added after a couple seconds. “You kind of told me the rest. Granted, you didn’t *say* anything, but I know you, so I made a safe assumption.”

He pulled in a breath, ready to continue on in his ramble, and she shook her head. “Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” she said, and let him hug her close again.

If I throw a child out a window, I will lose my license. If I throw a child out a window, I will lose my license. If I throw a child out a window, I will lose my license.

Carol repeated the mantra in her head over and over again as she marched her way from Barton’s classroom to the main office. She had a handful of hoodie sleeve in each hand—sweatshirts that belonged to Hill twins. Said twins were wearing said hoodies, but Carol didn’t trust herself to make any actual contact with the hellions at the moment, even though touches on the upper arm were sanctioned by the school district.

The boys had to move their legs at a near jog to keep up with Carol’s warpath. The one on her left silently moved along with her; the one on her right huffed and muttered. Carol stepped on his toes as they approached the final corner before making it to the office. It was mostly an accident.

“Ow! I’m telling my mom—she’ll sue.”

Carol could feel the dark look his twin shot him and definitely heard a hissed *shut up*. “Maybe you should listen to your brother,” she warned in a strained tone.

“Why?” the brat challenged. “He’s a pus—“

Kudos to the kid for finally having enough smarts to shut his face. He looked up at Carol with a sudden terrifying fear that fire might shoot from her eyeballs; she would’ve been happy to oblige.

Carol dragged them the final length to the office. On the way, she passed Bruce’s students lined up outside his doorway. What few six-year-olds that were whispering in line were immediately silenced when they saw Carol whip around the corner. Bruce’s face, which had initially made to greet her with a warm and open smile, slid into something hard and cold as he eyed the boys on either side of her.

When they made it into the main office, Darcy took one look and Carol watched her fight an eye roll. “Are we calling Mama Hill over here now or later?” the office manager asked.

“Not my call,” Carol answered. “Where is Mister Sitwell?”

“In his office,” Darcy replied before expression took on a hint of dark glee. “Mister Fury is in there, too.”

Carol heard an audible gulp but wasn’t sure which direction it came from. She nodded her thanks at Darcy, who mouthed *good luck* as they passed. The three of them made their way down the narrow hall of offices until they arrived at Sitwell’s door. For the first time since leaving Barton’s classroom, Carol uncurled fingers from the sweatshirt on her left to knock on the door. Two seconds later, the door opened and the empty space was filled by Principal Fury’s tall, dark frame. “Gentlemen,” he greeted, “come in and have a seat.”

Slowly, the boys edged their way into the chairs across from Sitwell’s desk. Carol noticed that the one brother still had the smarts to at least fake looking remorseful as she leaned her back against the closed door and crossed her arms. The other brother was still in idiot mode.

“Discipline isn’t your area,” he commented as he looked up at Fury. “My mom’s in charge of discipline at her school like Mister Sitwell is here. It’s not your job, so you don’t have to be here.”

The eyebrow above the principal’s eye patch arched in a challenge. “Is that so?”

“Yeah,” the boy answered. “So you can go.”

“Well, part of my duties includes making sure my staff is okay. And looking at Miss Danvers’s face, I can tell that she is not alright. So I’m going to stay in here and find out why that is. How does that sound to you?”

The boy’s only answer was to deflate in defeat in his chair.

Sitwell asked who wanted to start things off, and the good brother began to accurately detail how he and his brother noticed that Carol and Clint were busy helping different students write narratives using this week’s spelling words and how Anna—already done with her work—was back at the bookshelf looking for a new story to read. The boys came up behind her and began to shred her on any weakness they could find: her clothes, her hair, her supposed intellect. They’d done so quietly so as not to draw attention, and it wasn’t until Anna’s first choked sob that anyone realized what was happening. Both Carol and Clint’s heads whipped around at the sound, and Carol had felt her nostrils flare. She’d volunteered to take the boys to the office. Clint had wanted to have yet another hallway chat, but fat lot of good those had been doing, so she’d left him to soothe Anna.

When the boys were done telling their tale, Carol nodded at Sitwell to confirm the accuracy of their version of events. “Miss Danvers,” Fury said, “why don’t you go write up your account of what happened so we have on it on record? The four of us are going to have a little phone conference with Miss Hill. And who knows?” he added with a hint of a smirk. “Since she’s right next door, maybe she’ll just walk over here to chat.”

The muffled groan of pain brought a tiny bit of joy to Carol’s heart.

She slipped out of the office and into the empty conference room across the way. After she gathered a pen and a piece of paper, she dropped into a chair and took a couple cleansing breaths. She put her mind into military mode so she could write up a report without emotions hindering her words. Just as she was about to put pen to paper, her cell phone vibrated in her back pocket.

Barton: *They still alive?*

For now, she answered.

Bucky's kids were at specials, so I called him up to help calm Anna.

K, she responded. She almost locked her phone to start on her report, but instead backed out to the list of text conversations and opened the one three down from the top.

I will be at a bar tonight and in need of distractions.

It only took about ninety seconds for a response to buzz through. **James:** *Tell me when and where to be. Should I wear protective gear?*

Carol felt the corner of her mouth tug into a faint hint of a smile. *I'll try not to be that awful. Just need a break from hellions tonight.*

If you need a release after the bar, I'd be happy to oblige.

The rush of heat in her stomach was perfectly timed with the door opening. Carol dropped her phone onto the table like a hot potato as she looked up at Fury. His eyebrows shot up and she could tell he was fighting back a smile. "You okay?"

"What?"

"Like I said to the boys, part of my duties is making sure my staff is alright. Are you?"

Carol sighed and shrugged. "Sixty-two," she answered.

"Sixty-two what?"

"Days until those idiots finish fifth grade and I never have to see them again."

"I need this day to end," Natasha grumbled to herself, and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Ninety-five percent of the time, Natasha loved teaching gym to elementary schoolers. A number of her college friends—never mind her father—never understood her vocation, but that never mattered. Watching children grow into their bodies, learning and using new skills every day . . . It reminded her of when she first started gymnastics, and the exhilarating feeling that followed perfecting a new transition or sticking a difficult dismount.

Other days, though, she wanted to lock all the children in the gym and throw away the key.

Winter was always the toughest season as a gym teacher because rare were the days where it was warm and dry enough to take them outside. Natasha tried to fill the winter months with as many different short units as possible—the state-mandated dance unit, basic gymnastics, the strength-and-endurance testing that usually ended with a kid sobbing while halfway up the climbing rope—but even then, the students started getting squirrely and restless. She'd pushed back the start of their basketball unit to spend two weeks playing indoor soccer and kickball, and it seemed to settle them.

Until, inevitably, today.

"You're okay," she promised for the fourth time, crouching in front of Lucy and brushing hair out of her eyes. Lucy, a third-grader, was one of those remarkably delicate students who cried at absolutely everything. Natasha'd first noticed it two years earlier, when Lucy was a perpetually-tearful first-grader, and tried to work with her on it, but today, there was no consoling her. No, Lucy'd tried to catch a flying kickball and, when it popped her in the jaw, fell to the floor and

started sobbing.

Natasha'd checked for blood, for broken teeth, for *any* sign of injury other than a fright, but found none.

Which was why, while the kids continued to play, she was crouched on the sideline of the gym with the girl, gently touching her hair.

"Do you want to go see Miss Potts?" she asked. Pepper worked wonders with students like Lucy, thanks to her calming presence. "You could maybe draw with her, or—"

"Mom and Dad said to stop bothering Miss Potts so much," Lucy sniffled. She wiped her nose on her shirt sleeve. "They said I have to stop being a baby."

Natasha grit her teeth and tried to hold onto an encouraging smile. "Your Mom and Dad probably just want you to be strong." When Lucy's head snapped up, she forced her smile to grow a few degrees. "But everyone becomes strong in their own time."

"And they stop crying?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you cry?"

Natasha opened her mouth, but luckily, shouting distracted her for a moment. A fast line-drive of a kick sent the red rubber ball bouncing off two different walls, and the students all scrambled to grab it. She glanced at the clock in hopes that class would end in the near future. To Lucy, though, she said, "One of the fifth graders cried in class this morning."

Lucy stared at her. "They *did*?"

Natasha nodded, thinking back to her disastrous first hour. "They were playing soccer, and one of the boys refused to tie his shoes. He tripped and bit his lip. And then, he cried." She left out the terrifying sound his head had made as it impacted the gym floor, or how she'd spent the first ten minutes after he'd gone to the nurse's office lecturing the little hellions about laughing at another's pain. She put a hand on Lucy's shoulders. "Sometimes, no matter how old and strong you are, you need to cry."

Lucy looked about ready to respond, but then her classmates started arguing about whether someone was out. Natasha hopped to her feet and whistled at them. "What happens if you can't agree?" she called out to the two self-appointed team captains, who were glaring at one another.

They blinked, but Lucy piped up. "You switch sides."

"Then get to it!"

The kids all groaned, but the fielding team and the kickers started slowly switching places. When Natasha glanced over her shoulder, Lucy was standing and dusting herself off. "Can I play again?" she asked hopefully.

Natasha smiled. "Of course," she said, and shooed Lucy off to join her team. For the first time, it appeared her day might get better.

It did not get better.

After lunch, James's second grade class not only couldn't agree on whether to play kickball or modified second-grade soccer, but everything ended in bickering and name-calling. By halfway through the class, she'd had half the boys—including the Odinson kid and two of his co-conspirators—sitting on the sidelines and watching silently after they'd turned soccer into a game of "kick the ball directly at your classmates' heads." When Henry Odinson rebelled and ran back into the soccer game, he ended up in Sitwell's office for an extra-long timeout.

One of her afternoon kindergarteners peed his pants in the middle of their soccer game. But he hadn't noticed at first, resulting in a trail of urine across the gym, three kids stepping or slipping in it, and a lot of tears when they finally figured out the culprit. (The teacher apologized profusely, because, apparently, bathroom issues were not uncommon for this one.)

And the first graders—

Well.

Natasha would forever prefer urine to projectile vomit of lunchroom spaghetti.

By the time she'd herded the last first grader out of the gym, she felt like she *must* stink, bathed as she was in the sweat, blood, tears, and other bodily fluids of children from ages five to eleven. She grabbed one of her extra hooded sweatshirts out of her closet of an office, then locked herself in the women's bathroom to at least splash water on her face and change her top. She felt at least halfway human by the time she walked outside for bus duty with the others specials teachers.

It was only after ten minutes outside that Steve Rogers walked up to her. "Uh, Natasha?" he asked sheepishly. When she glanced at him, he was rubbing the side of his neck. "You know that your shirt's got, like, brown stains on the back of it, right?"

Natasha felt her mouth fall open, but then, she remembered two days earlier, when she'd spilled coffee on her desk during her planning period and used her sweatshirt to mop it up.

She closed her eyes. "What's your policy on killing co-workers?" she asked.

Steve laughed. "Your day couldn't have been *that* bad," he commented. When she glared at him, he raised his hands. "Or it could have been."

"You have *no* idea."

"I'm going to get fired," Bucky Barnes said for the fifth time in as many minutes, and dragged his hands through his hair.

One of the big "hits" for his fourth graders at his old school had been their yearly trip to the science center to do all sorts of hands-on science activities, and Bucky'd immediately rushed to sign the whole second grade up for a similar experience. Field trips at his old school were choreographed works of art: parents fought ruthlessly over who got to chaperone; the chosen few chaperones showed up with extra lunches just in case students forgot theirs; students behaved (almost) perfectly, kowtowed into gratitude and responsibility by the glares of mothers who'd chaperoned their class trips since kindergarten.

Bucky's new school, however, featured fewer seasoned-veteran chaperones. Field trips, he'd found out after he started boasting about the big science center plan, were rarer; the budget didn't have as much wiggle room to sponsor them, and more families couldn't afford to pick up the tab. When he'd mentioned the whole thing to Natasha, she'd laughed until she was red in the face and wished him the most insincere good luck he'd ever heard.

Suddenly, he understood why.

In the foyer of the science center, nineteen second graders stared at him.

Nineteen out of *twenty*.

“We will find William,” Thor Odinson comforted, resting a heavy hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “He could not have wandered far.”

Bucky glanced over their shoulders at the sprawling three-story behemoth of a building, filled with two theaters, a planetarium, four interactive “exploration” exhibits, and more side-exhibits than he could count. When he glanced up at Thor, Thor shrugged. “We will find him,” he repeated.

“He could be literally anywhere,” Bucky replied.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a total pessimist?” Darcy piped up.

“Yes,” he returned, and scanned the sea of tiny bodies one more time to make sure he hadn’t just miscounted.

He’d noticed Billy’s urge to wander away from the group pretty early in the course of the field trip—early enough, in fact, that he’d reassigned Billy from one group (featuring a mom who’d never chaperoned before and who was clearly unprepared for the experience) to Thor’s—but he hadn’t counted on the kid breaking entirely away. No, he’d even watched as the kid wandered ahead or stayed back, playing with exhibits they weren’t visiting or, at one point, following another field trip group in a different direction. He’d tried hard to keep tabs on him, but then Mallory’d gotten soap from one of the exhibits in her eyes and Alex’d tripped on an untied shoelace and burst out crying like he’d been shot and—

Look, Bucky wasn’t proud about losing a kid, okay? He’d tried, he really had, and now he was *going to get fired*.

“Go look for him,” Darcy encouraged, elbowing him in the ribs. The nervy mom and another parent were standing at the back of the group of kids, keeping them from breaking rank and heading out to the bus. “We’ll get them loaded up with the other classes and ready to go.”

“You think I can find him alone in the science center?”

“Uh, no, but I think you can ask the employees to put out a science-center APB and hunt him down.” When he sighed, she elbowed him again. “You’re so much more fired if you don’t find him than if you do.”

“She is most likely right,” Thor said with a solemn nod. Bucky decided around then that he didn’t really *like* Thor as much as tolerate his ability to scare kids into law and order.

One last count revealed that, no, he was still short one small person, so while Darcy started herding the kids toward the bus where all the other second grade classes were waiting for them. He scanned the entry hall as he went, hoping that Billy was maybe just admiring one of the posters that advertised the exhibits, but of course, he wasn’t that lucky.

There was a huge group of kids with screaming, harried moms at the information desk, and the science center staff looked too frazzled to pay attention to him. He decided to loop through their last three stops—two hands-on displays and the planetarium—one more time before investing in a “science-center APB.” He wanted to save himself a little grief back at the school.

(And maybe convince Fury that his ingenuity in finding Billy earned him one more chance before he got kicked to the curb.)

Kids swarmed both hands-on displays, but none of them wore Billy's signature bright-blue fleece jacket or had the messy flop of dark brown hair. Bucky smiled tightly at one of the center employees as he passed and headed into the planetarium. There wasn't a show on, the room garishly bright, and Bucky let the door bang behind him. He scanned the rows of empty chairs, and he almost walked right back out of the room before he heard a whimper.

"Billy?" he asked, following the sound. He came around the control panel that the science center staff members used to find Billy crouched on the floor with another little boy he'd never seen before. His orange t-shirt advertised that he belonged to a local Catholic school; Bucky recognized the shirts from one of the other field trip groups. Billy was wrapped around the other boy, who cried openly, his face buried in his knees.

Instinct won out over sense, and Bucky immediately dropped to his knees next to the boys. "What happened?" he asked as the other boy sniffled loudly. "Is he okay? Did you two get—"

"He lost his class," Billy said quietly. The other boy nodded meekly, his face still tucked away. "We were leaving. I saw him and I wanted to help him."

Bucky frowned at him. "You left our class, Billy."

"I know where the busses go! He didn't!" Billy cast Bucky a desperate, wide-eyed look. "You and Miss Potts and Mister Rogers and Mister Coulson and Miss Parker and *everybody* always say to be nice and help! I was helping!"

The longer Billy looked at him, big eyes glistening with his own tears, the more tempted Bucky was to sweep them both up and carry them out of the room. He looked at the other boy, his face red and splotchy from crying, and forced a little smile. "You shouldn't have left us," he told Billy quietly. "You should have stayed with the class. Okay?"

Billy nodded. "Okay. But can we find Teddy's class now? I don't want to leave him all by himself."

As soon as Billy said it, Teddy scooted closer to Billy and shoved his face against Billy's shoulder. Billy grabbed his hand and held on tight. Bucky couldn't help but smile at the two of them. "We can find Teddy's class," he promised. "But on the way back to school, you're going to sit with me and we're going to talk about what happened."

"Okay," Billy agreed, and when he used Bucky's shoulder to help him stand up, he dragged Teddy with him.

Teddy's third-grade teacher practically cried in relief when Bucky (and Billy) delivered him, unscathed, back to their group.

And back at work, Principal Fury laughed for five minutes when Bucky told him the story. "You mean nobody told you kid's fucking Houdini?" he demanded, shaking his head.

Bucky cast a glance out Fury's office door just in time to catch one of Darcy's most innocent, unassuming smiles. He bit the inside of his lip to keep from glaring at her. "No, nobody told me that, sir," he replied, and Fury started laughing all over again.

Phil rushed into the library three minutes before his sub was supposed to leave. He hated missing

any time, especially when it meant leaving Wade Wilson in his beloved home away from home, but Birdie had been under the weather for a couple of days and Clint had made the last run to the vet. Thankfully, Birdie's woes could be handled with some antibiotic eyedrops. He'd dropped the pup off at home with a new get-well-soon chew toy, sped through Wendy's drive-thru for a cup of chili, and sped walked up the stairs to his classroom. He'd shoveled the mediocre soup down his throat and swiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand between the fast-food place and the school.

He took a deep breath before entering the library to prepare himself for the mess within. If Wade followed the schedule, he would be outside on recess duty (knowing Wilson, more than likely challenging students to foot races or epic tetherball games). The room was dark and quiet, and Phil couldn't help but cringe when he turned on the bank of overhead lights. There were a number of chairs that weren't pushed in around the tables to his left. The bookshelves didn't look too awful, but the *Return Books Here* bin was an overflowing mess. Granted, that was Phil's fault since he'd left specific instructions to Wilson not to try and shelve anything. The substitute had a habit of completely ignoring the alphabet and Dewey Decimal System, preferring instead to arrange books on a shelf in rainbow order.

Phil managed to get all the returned books within their designated bin by the time a mish-mash group of second graders arrived. There were only a handful of them, but they were hardly in a good mood. These were the stragglers whose parents didn't get permissions slips turned in for them to attend the field trip. Phil had volunteered to take the group and let all the other special teachers have an extra planning period; he made sure to politely but firmly point out that the extra time was to be used to actually plan lessons or catch-up on entering grades, not goof-off (Stark).

Phil tried his best to put on a friendly face, but the dozen eight-year-olds wanted nothing to do with it. They spent the entire time whining and complaining how life was unfair. They had a few choice names to call their classmates. Phil chose to pretend not to hear them instead of scolding them and souring their moods even more. He asked what they wanted to do, and the general consensus was to spend their forty-five minutes to try and earn some extra Accelerated Reader points. That was fine with Phil, since he felt too rushed to throw together a fresh one-off lesson plans for the small group (he may have forgotten that the second grade was out for the day with all the rushing around and dealing with goopy puppy eyes). Once the students were settled all with a book or at a computer to test their knowledge of plot retention, Phil did his best to tidy up the library. He was in the middle of shelving a few battered *Goosebumps* books when he heard a yell and small fists slam down on a keyboard.

He quickly shoved the books into place with a mental note to come back and put them in proper numerical sequence later before rising from his kneeling position and going to see what was wrong. The source of the outburst was a small boy named Taylor, who often tried to compensate for his small stature with a lot of bluster and attitude. "What's wrong?" Phil asked gently as he knelt beside the boy.

"This thing is broken," Taylor yelled.

"Inside voice, please," Phil chided. "What exactly is broken?"

"The 'puter. I put in all the answers I was supposed to it and it won't give me the points for the book." He holds up a wrinkled scrap of notebook paper with a series of handwritten letters on it; Phil easily recognized the cheat sheet as soon as he sees it. "Peyton said I could copy his answers since he got all the points for the book."

Phil gently took the piece of paper out of his hand. "You can't just copy *a*, *b*, *c*, or *d*. The computer

shuffles the answers around to make sure you actually read the book before it gives you points.”

Taylor crossed his arms over his chest in huff. “That’s stupid.”

“No, that’s the way it should be. If you work hard and read the books, you’ll earn points.” Taylor responded by giving the keyboard a shove, causing Phil to sigh and a headache to start between his temples. He snuck a glance at the clock and wondered how missing half the day makes the remaining few hours take four times as long to pass. “Please don’t do that. If you break the computer, then I’ll have to have Mister Stark come in here and fix it.”

“But don’t you like Mister Stark? He’s my favorite.”

Phil sidestepped answering the question by responding with, “Why is Mister Stark your favorite?”

“Because we get to play awesome games on the ‘puter, and he tells us all kinds of jokes. And,” he adds with an increasingly dark look, “he doesn’t make me read books.”

Phil gave him a tight smile as he stood. “Why don’t you go pair up with Justin,” he suggested with a nod towards another student, “and see if you can pass a test together?”

“Fine,” Taylor sighed as he heaved himself out of his seat.

Phil again tried to avoid looking at the clock to see how much longer the day would be. He failed.

Steve hated this week in his curriculum, because no matter the grade, they all needed to use glitter. Tony normally joked that glitter was the herpes of the art and craft world, but this year he seemed to be intent on elaborately describing all the stripper fantasies Steve must be fulfilling for Bucky this week. Steve just rolled his eyes and walked away, and didn’t mention just how often the last few days he’d had to dust specks of glitter from various parts of his boyfriend’s body.

Not that Steve minded inspecting Bucky for errant art supplies.

And speaking of Bucky, Steve looked up just in time to see him lean his body against the doorframe to Steve’s classroom. Steve took the opportunity to give a long, appreciative look up and down the man, but when his eyes settled on Bucky’s face, it was hard to miss the tightness in his jaw and nerves in his eyes.

Steve knew Bucky had just had a little conference with Fury regarding the day’s field trip. Bucky had given Steve the short version via text of the craziness that had happened. Steve had assumed Fury wouldn’t be too upset since Bucky had found Billy and brought him home safe and sound, but looking at the expression at Bucky’s face, Steve was suddenly unsure. “How bad?” he asked.

“What?” Bucky replied with a small shake of his head. Steve wasn’t sure when exactly he and Bucky fell into mostly being able to communicate through eyebrows and shrugs, but apparently they were there now. After some non-verbal prompting, Bucky answered the question. “I still have a job. Two, in fact.”

Steve stilled at the words and couldn’t help the new and endless possibilities from running through his mind, all of them resulting in Bucky leaving the school in a few months. “Where?” he asked, trying desperately to keep fear out of his voice; he was pretty sure he wasn’t completely successful.

Steve knew Bucky had a history with the science center, and since it was connected to Jane Foster-Odinson’s planetarium, he could easily see Bucky getting offered some education and curriculum consultant position. Or perhaps a position had opened at his old school and absence had made

Bucky's heart grow fonder.

"Here," Bucky'd responded and then grinned wide. He chuckled as he walked into the room and reached for Steve's side. "You're pretty hard to walk away from," Bucky breathed.

Steve felt a flush rush up his cheeks and he ducked his head to breathe a sigh of relief. He looked up and let himself stare into Bucky's eyes for minute, a held gaze to show how glad he was that Bucky wasn't going anywhere. "Where?"

"Wanda let it slip a few days ago during the Accelerated Reader meeting that there'd be a fourth grade position opening up next year."

"Yeah?"

Bucky nodded. "What she didn't mention was that it would be her. She wants to move to be closer to her brother or something, and there's an opening in the district where he lives. Plus it's closer to where her kids want to go to college."

"And Fury wondered if you want to take her place next year?"

"As well as be department chair for fourth grade."

Steve gave him a small smile. "Not exactly what you were expecting after the field trip, was it?"

"No," Bucky chuckled. The smile slid off his face and the nervousness once again replaced its presence. "What do you think?" he asked in a barely-there voice.

Steve's eyebrows rose in surprise. Not too many people came to him for their thoughts on things. "I think it's a great opportunity." Bucky rolled his eyes at the canned answer, and Steve settled a hand on his hip before continuing his response. "You talk all the time about how different second graders are from fourth graders and how much readjusting you have to do."

Bucky's lips rolled together in a tight line. "I don't mean to whine, and it's not like I don't want to be challenged in my work."

"It's not whining," Steve reassured. "I see both grades; I know how different they are. And besides," he added with a smirk, "weren't you just saying a few days ago that being on the AR committee was five times more stressful than being a department chair for a grade?"

"If you tell Coulson that, I will smother you in your sleep."

"What exactly is going to be doing the smothering?" he asked in a low rumble and grinned at his boyfriend's eye roll.

Bucky stepped away with a sigh, ran his fingers through his hair, and started to pace. "I feel like it's a trick," he muttered. "Like yet another thing to happen to me this year that's too good to be true."

Steve avoided the urge to kiss the breath out of Bucky, because he wasn't the only one having a too-good-to-be-true year. "Fury doesn't play tricks, at least not on his staff. Maybe Tony, but not you. If he offered the position, he's serious about it and believes you'll pull it off." He watched Bucky pace the width of the classroom a moment more before asking, "What's your hesitation?"

The other man shrugged. "It's the exact same thing I did before, and I don't want to be one of those teachers that settles in and never changes a lesson plan before they retire."

“I don’t think you could ever be that way.”

“And then there’s the fact that I’d actually be sticking around here and should probably move closer because my commute sucks. But I hate the thought of moving and finding the right place.”

Steve swallowed the offer in his throat for Bucky to move in with him. He’d lucked out with saying “I love you.” He didn’t need to push things even further with such great speed. “What else?” he prompted.

Bucky paused in his pacing to peer out the door into the hallway. “My current classroom is some pretty sweet real estate space.”

Steve grinned. “We’d both be better teachers if we weren’t across the hall from each other.”

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?” Bucky asked with a wink.

“You forgot one other thing,” Steve said. “If you move grades, you’ll have to teach Henry Odinson twice.” He then cracked up at the litany of swearing that spewed out of Bucky’s mouth.

Carol and Rhodey Sittin' In a Tree

The morning after the idiot Hill twins decided to target Anna in Clint's class, they were back in their seats in their classes. They both had enough sense to look slightly chastised, and they'd behaved well so far that morning. Jessica Cage kept rolling her eyes at Carol for staring the pair of them down, but Carol believed the math teacher's willingness not to stalk the boys' behavior was due to ramped-up pregnancy hormones. She'd obviously been compromised into thinking that the boys would be good; Carol not so much.

The boys kept their attention on Jessica's lecture about subtracting fractions with different denominators, but occasionally, their eyes flickered over to watch Carol pace around the room as she redirected her students who were losing focus. She caught the boys' eyes each time and arched an eyebrow at them. They quickly switched their focus back to Jessica, and Carol had to hide a grin.

They changed from math to reading and writing, and Clint was already waiting in the hallway to eye the Hill twins like prey as soon as they hit his classroom door. *Good*, Carol thought. From the way he'd grunted a response to her greeting this morning, she wasn't sure he was happy with her and would take the boys seriously today. Maybe he and Phil'd just gotten handsy this morning and Clint wasn't properly caffeinated before coming to school.

It was Friday, which meant spelling test day. Carol wouldn't be able to make sure the hellions would keep to their good behavior in Clint's class. She pulled her four kids with individualized education plans—Anna, Brandt, Kallie, and Chris—and walked them down to her closet of a classroom. There, the four students quietly took the spelling tests that Carol had modified before meeting James at the bar last night.

Her brain immediately flashed back to the previous evening and the ease with which being around James so quickly caused the tension and stress of the day to fade. It'd been a while since she'd felt that way about a guy, and the only person she'd admitted that to was Jess Drew. Carol had sworn and bribed her best friend to secrecy about all of it. The last thing Carol needed was for Tony Stark to find out that he was actually decent at matchmaking. At least, this one time.

Carol did not want to have to endure that level of a Stark ego trip. She was fairly certain no one on staff would want to either. That level of obnoxiousness would be too much to bear for even the likes of Pepper or Bruce and might require her to having to dump James, and that was not a viable option. Not with his sense of humor, kindness, skilled fingers—

"You're smiling." Carol looked down, and startled out of her thoughts by the hushed voice, saw Brandt looking around the room. "What are you smiling at?"

Teaching children with extreme ADD was not beneficial to mid-morning daydreams. "Finish your test," Carol said quietly so as not to disrupt the other three more than they already were.

"I'm done," he responded as he held up the paper for her to inspect.

"Then get on the computer and practice subtracting fractions like we learned in Missus Cage's class this morning."

He waved her off, a brash move for a ten-year-old who was one of the shortest kids in the grade, but Carol appreciated his spunk. "I don't need to practice. I'm good." Carol set his spelling test back onto the top of his desk and wrote $\frac{3}{4} - \frac{1}{2} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ on the paper. "Solve it," she challenged.

Brandt scrunched his face up at the problem as one hand disappeared into his brown curls to scratch his scalp, an obvious tell to Carol that he wasn't sure what the first step should be. He made a few marks on the page before looking back up at her. "Maybe I should go practice on the computer."

"Sounds like a good idea."

Once everyone was finished with their spelling tests, Carol worked with them one-on-one by performing their bi-weekly tests to check their skills at reading out loud, pronouncing words correctly, and how quickly they could read. After the literacy tests were finished and scores recorded in the binder each student had in her classroom—Carol swore half of her job was just paperwork—she reviewed math and reading with each student individually and made sure to log the minutes to file as a report to go with their individualized education plans. Once she made sure that Brandt could do the fractions problem she'd written on the bottom of his spelling test, she checked the clock and saw that it was time to send them back to class so they could go to lunch.

Anna was the last to get her things ready, and her eyes kept flashing over Carol's direction as she made notes in Chris's binder. "Everything okay?" Carol asked without looking up.

The girl pulled something out of her folder and hesitantly held it out to Carol as she walked up to the teacher's desk. It was a piece of construction paper folded in half with the words *Thank You* written with care on the front. "Grandma and Grandpa always made me write thank you notes when someone did something nice for me. But now I live with my Dad, and he doesn't have any cards I could use, so Mister Rogers let me have some paper."

Carol gently pulled the gift from her student's fingers like the treasure it was. "Thank you, Anna," she said with a smile. The girl's face lit up and she snuck a quick hug around Carol's neck before grabbing her things and darting out of the room.

"Yeah, okay, but are you going to see him tonight?"

Jessica Drew punctuated the question by trying to kick Carol in the kneecap, but Carol dodged and left Jessica swinging her feet in the air. She glared, and Jessica huffed hair out of her eyes before glaring back. Carol'd asked her friend to stop by her classroom after the kids all left for the day to help sort some files that, in april, would move down into storage. She should have guessed Jessica wouldn't actually *help*.

"Why do you care?" she asked, dumping a few empty folders in the recycling bin. When Jessica, seated on her desk, snorted at her, she rested her hands on her hips. "Last time I dated a guy, you didn't care."

"Okay, first? Last time you dated a guy, Steve Rogers was still teething." Carol rolled her eyes, but Jessica was already ticking reasons off on her fingers. "Second, I had a boyfriend then, which meant I was getting laid. Which meant that I was way too busy *getting* busy to—"

"Point taken," Carol cut her off.

"Third, your last boyfriend was an assclown. Fourth, he was also a douchenozzle. Fifth, he was *also* a—"

Carol looked up from her pile of manila folders to shoot her friend a warning look. "Jess."

Jessica, the palm of one hand pulling back the thumb of her other, tossed her head so hard that hair hung back in front of her rolling eyes. "Unless you forgot, he cheated on you. He cheated with a

nineteen-year-old stripper—”

“Ballet dancer.”

“—named Candi-with-an-I. He is a total douche who deserves exactly none of our boundless goodwill.” Carol chuckled, shaking her head, and Jessica scowled at her. “We have boundless goodwill.”

“You could fit your goodwill into a thimble.”

“And yours into a, I don’t know, midget thimble, what’s your point?” Carol snapped her head up, and Jessica raised both her hands. “Little person thimble, sorry. Person with little-person-ness? How do you use person-first language on a person who’s already a little—”

Carol sighed. “I sometimes don’t know why I’m friends with you.”

“It’s because I buy you alcohol and sometimes pet your cat,” Jessica retorted. Carol hid her grin by sorting back through the folders on the floor, but Jessica—like always—wasn’t discouraged by a few seconds of silence. “Okay, seriously,” she pressed, “you’re both obviously super into each other. As far as I can tell, the only reason you’re not pulling a Rogers-Barnes weekend lock-in is because you like to pretend to be a grown-up.”

When Carol glanced over, it was to discover that Jessica had stolen a piece of gum from her desk drawer and was blowing a bubble. She raised an eyebrow. “Pretend?”

Jessica snapped her gum, waving a hand. “You know what I mean. My point is that you guys seem to have a pretty good thing going, but you’re still not willing to do much more than admit it to me—which falls short of admitting it to *him*.” She paused. “Not that I’m the best judge of relationships, what with my mad cultist scientist parents or whatever,” she added with a shrug, “but I think they loved each other enough that I can point out something good when I see it.”

Carol sighed as she picked up another stack of old files to dump (confidential information removed, of course) into the recycle bin. “It’s not—” she started, but Jessica tipped her head to the side. She ran fingers through her hair. “Like I told you the other day, I like him,” she finally said, her hands falling back to her hips. “He’s good company. We get along great. But after everything I’ve been through, I’m not sure diving in with puppy-dog eyes and telling him that his biceps are a work of art is the way to go.”

“Which is too bad, because I’d love to hear it,” a voice chimed in, and Carol nearly leapt out of her skin as she whirled around to see James Rhodes standing in her doorway. He smiled at her, the expression overtaking his face and dancing in his eyes, and she felt her stomach warm immediately. Behind her, Jessica started laughing hard enough she choked on her gum.

James, on the other hand, crossed his arms over his chest. He wore a button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his work ID still hanging on a lanyard around his neck. “You were saying?” he prompted.

“Oh, shut up,” Carol retorted, and his grin only brightened. She unsubtly flipped Jessica off as she walked to the door and lightly punched him in the bicep. He reached for her wrist, and she stepped immediately out of range. “What are you doing here? And if you say you came to see me, I’m going to remind you that Tony Stark works in this building and there are things he never needs to know.”

James laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m going to see Tony next.” She raised an eyebrow at him, and he

shook his head. “Pepper called me by to talk with the grandfather of two students—”

“The Garrisons?” Jessica piped up. Carol twisted over to look at her, but for once, Jessica’s maniacal grin was replaced with actual concern. She stopped swinging her legs. “Macy’s in my class. They were out for close to a week, popped back up for one day, disappeared again—”

“Yeah, those are the kids,” James replied, nodding. “We’re trying to figure out what’s going on with their mom before we move forward, and Pepper thought the grandfather might have some insights.”

“What’s going on with their mom is that she sucks,” Jessica retorted. She hopped off the desk, spat her gum in the trash, and walked right over to stand in front of James. She crossed her arms over her chest. “And I know crappy mothers, by the way.”

Carol let a tiny smile nudge at her mouth as she shook her head at her friend. “James Rhodes, this is Jessica Drew, my—”

“Best friend in the universe,” Jessica finished. She offered a hand, and James smiled as he shook it. Better still, he held onto the smile after Jessica narrowed her eyes into unforgiving slivers. “You hurt her, and I will shiv you like we’re in an episode of *Oz*.”

“Jessica!”

Carol tried to elbow her friend hard in the ribs, but she deftly stepped out of the way. “I’ve seen every episode,” she added to her warning. “I know how it works.”

“I swear to god, Jessica, I will—”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” James replied, and Carol was grateful to hear laughter in his voice. He only released Jessica’s hand when she finally stopped glaring. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. Don’t do it in the sex closet, that place is like a Dateline health crisis episode waiting to happen.” Carol moved to elbow her again, but she jumped away, squeezed between James and the doorjamb, and headed down the hallway. “Be good!” she shouted over her shoulder, and all while James laughed.

Carol rolled her eyes and jabbed him lightly in the stomach. “Don’t encourage her,” she chided, and if her fingers lingered over his abs for a half-second, so be it. He grinned at her. “She’s bad enough without your encouragement.”

“Like my biceps are bad enough without you telling me?” he teased, and she snorted at him. He stepped away from the doorframe and closed the distance between them until she could almost feel the heat radiating off his chest. Her hand pressed more fully against his stomach. “Unless that’s only part of what you planned on saying once you saw me again.”

“You would be so lucky,” Carol returned. She tipped her head up, meeting his eyes, and—

“Rhodey, I swear, for a guy who went overseas and liberated countries or whatever it is Marines actually do, you sure get lost in an elementary school pretty— Uh.” Tony’s voice trailed off from somewhere behind James as Carol, very quickly, slid out of range. By the time she’d made it to her desk, James had turned around to face Tony. He stood in the doorway, his eyes wide and his hair wild like he’d run his fingers through it too many times in the day (pretty likely, knowing him), and for a second, he just stared. Carol forced a smile as she started poking around the paperwork on her desk. “Why are you in Danvers’s office?” he asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Carol spotted the flash of one of James's most charming smiles. She pretended she didn't feel it in her gut. "I wanted to stop by and say hi."

"Say hi," Tony repeated.

"Yes, Tony."

"To Danvers."

"Yes."

"As in Carol Danvers, the woman who you saw a comedy show with and then never again discussed with me because you swore you would—and I quote—light me on fire if I ever set you up on another blind date without your express permission?"

Carol broke her charade of caring about the crap on her desk to roll her eyes. "He was saying a polite hello, Stark," she snapped. Tony turned his frown on her. "People do that."

"I've heard the same," James replied, his grin stupidly dazzling. Carol purposely looked away. "People say polite hellos, Tony."

"Passingly friendly, even," Carol agreed.

"Right. Friendly hellos when you're passing by someone's office."

Silence swept over the room, but when Carol turned in Tony and James's direction (to throw something away, mind you), she realized that Tony was looking between the two of them like he was watching a tennis match. His eyes flicked back and forth for a full ten seconds before he finally heaved a sigh. "You're lying," he declared, his hands falling to his hips. "You're lying, I *know* you're lying, and I hate you both."

Carol smiled innocently. "We're lying about saying hello?" she asked.

"You're lying about *everything*," Tony retorted, and then grabbed James by the arm to literally drag him out of the room. His laughter echoed through the hallway even when Carol couldn't see him anymore.

About twenty minutes later, Carol received a text from James that simply read, *escaped intact, he believes nothing, will I see you this weekend?* She smiled at it for a long time before she replied, *if you're lucky* and tucked her phone back in her pocket.

And, predictably, when she emerged into the school's front foyer another half-hour after that, Tony was perched on one of the couches there. He rose, immediately crossing his arms over his chest. "If you're dating my best friend, I have a right to know," he said, his tone colder than usual. "It's in the best friend handbook."

She curled her fingers around the strap of her bag. "Is it?"

"A guy has a right to know when another guy he cares about is getting all—" He waved a hand, and Carol cocked her head at him. He sighed. "Look, the only euphemism right now I can cook up is *oh captain, my captain!* and that feels a little too unpatriotic, even for me."

She laughed. "You have nothing to worry about, Stark," she promised, raising a hand. "It was a friendly hello, nothing—"

“No,” he interrupted, pointing a finger at her. “I already did the ‘best friend secretly dates a woman I know and doesn’t tell me and then gets hurt and then I end up being the insensitive prick because I don’t know what woman he’s secretly dating’ dance once this year. I’m *not* doing it again.” He rolled his lips together. “Rhodey’s a good man. He deserves a woman who’s not going to walk all over him, or disappoint him, or otherwise make him retreat into his weird ‘I will never love again’ monk mode.” His face hardened. “Don’t disappoint him.”

Something deep inside of Carol’s stomach swam, almost nauseating her, but she ignored and forced a smile at Tony. “It’s hard to disappoint someone you’re not dating,” she replied with a shrug.

“The woman I once not-dated and then married would disagree with you, there,” he returned, and then left her standing in the foyer, staring after him, as he walked away.

“Stark crawled under your skin with this boyfriend thing, didn’t he?” Jessica needled, twirling a tortilla chip in the air between them, and Carol rolled her eyes. “He gamed you, and now you’re sitting here, trying to decide whether you’ll actually call your boyfriend your boyfriend—”

“He is not my boyfriend,” Carol said for the tenth time.

“—and all because Tony Stark freaked you out.” Jessica cackled. “This is great.”

“I hate you,” Carol muttered, and her friend grinned as she chomped down on her chip.

The bar at the Fuzzy Iguana was crowded and loud, just the same as any other Saturday night. Brassy mariachi-style music blared through the speakers, pumping around them as the bartender—complete with sombrero—mixed massive drinks with tiny umbrellas. They were supposed to be out celebrating Wanda’s new job, but of course, everyone else was at least a half-hour behind schedule: Monica’d gotten caught up in some home-improvement project; Ororo had her dance class Saturday nights; Wanda’s brother had dropped off his twins unexpectedly; Peter’s junker of a car broke down and May needed to rescue him before his girlfriend’s overprotective dad got home. The end result left Carol and Jessica alone at the bar, sipping enormous margaritas in stupid flavors like “manic mango.”

Said mango was turning Jessica’s lips an unhealthy shade of orange. “Call a sexy spade a spade,” she said, reaching for the chips again. “Don’t let him pull the ‘but we weren’t exclusive’ crap that my last boyfriend—friend-boy?—pulled on me.”

“But you weren’t exclusive,” Carol reminded her.

“Not my point.” When Carol sighed and sucked down more frozen margarita through her straw, Jessica poked her in the arm with a long finger. “I saw you two together yesterday, and it was pretty okay. And it was definitely better than any Danvers-and-dude combination I’ve ever witnessed. The fact that somebody as self-obsessed as Tony has noticed only proves my point.”

“Tony just wants to gloat.”

“Something he’s way more likely to do if the first he time he finds out about you and his buddy is on the wedding invitation.” As Carol rolled her eyes again, her cell phone buzzed in her back pocket. She waited a few seconds before reaching for it, just in case Jessica planned on another James-related joke, but her friend had crossed her arms on the bar and buried her face in them. “How is it that you end up with these hot, not-screwed-up guys and I get the emotionally-stunted dudebros?” she lamented. Carol laughed a little as she thumbed past her lock screen and opened the incoming text. “I actively look for a guy and all I get is a night with a battery-operated personal

appliance. You fall on a wall of muscles, and—”

Carol’s cackle cut Jessica off, and within a single second, the dark haired woman’s head snapped up. “What?” she demanded as Carol tried to stop laughing. “Is it the boyfriend? Please do not tell me you are laughing at his sext, because—”

“Just *look*,” Carol wheezed, and shoved her phone at Jessica. Open on the screen were two messages from Clint. The first said *kids next door blew up their sister’s dolls again* and featured a picture of two dark-haired plastic dolls—knock-off Kens, if Carol had to guess—with charred clothes and missing limbs. The follow-up read *i made them headstones* and included another picture of the dolls, but this time with looseleaf tombstones labeled *HILL TWIN 1* and *HILL TWIN 2* in Clint’s messy handwriting. Just glancing at it made Carol start to laugh again.

Jessica, however, scowled at her. “You guys are the creepiest work-spouses ever,” she declared. “I’m going to pee until you—unbreak.” She waved her hand, and within seconds, she’d hopped off her stool and disappeared toward the bathroom, leaving behind her unnaturally orange drink and a mess of chip crumbs.

Carol shook her head, opening a text message reply to Clint, but something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Or rather, *someone*. He stood at a table on the slightly-raised circle of seating outside the bar, slipping off his navy-blue coat. The coat looked familiar, then the cut of his shoulders in a button-down shirt, then—

Carol nearly fell off her stool when the guy pulled off his winter cap. She’d recognize Sitwell’s bald head anywhere.

She grinned to herself, abandoning her response to Clint to open up a teasing text to Sitwell himself, when she realized he wasn’t alone. A woman stood behind Sitwell, wearing jeans and a loose white blouse, her hair curled around her shoulders. At first, Carol assumed she was a stranger, but then, the woman turned just far enough that Carol could see her face. It was a stern, smug face, one Carol’d glared at long enough and often enough that it was burned into her retinas. As she watched, Sitwell planted his hand on the small of the woman’s back and steered her gently into the booth. She smiled at him, leaning in close enough to murmur something, and his fingers lingered as he finally moved to sit across from her.

A blind person couldn’t miss the way he offered her his hand once he sat down, or how she smiled again before taking it, and Carol felt her mouth dry out.

Jasper Sitwell, the assistant principal in charge of disciplining shits like the Hill twins, was on a date with *Maria Hill*.

Carol ducked her head, staring at the empty text message in front of her, and then glanced back at the couple seated at their table. Something Sitwell said made Hill laugh, and they grinned at each other as the waiter came up to take their drink orders. When the couple glanced up, Carol realized she was the last place she wanted to be: right in their direct line of sight.

She swore under her breath, gathered up everything she could—drinks, chips, Jessica’s oversized bag—and moved all the way to the other end of the bar. Here, her back was to Sitwell and Hill’s table, but she could make them out in one of the many mirrors that lined the restaurant’s walls. Mostly.

She reopened her abandoned text to Sitwell. *Hey, I had an idea about something, do you have ten minutes to chat?* she typed.

In the hazy mirror-distortion, Sitwell frowned and said something to Hill before reaching for his phone. Carol squinted as she watched him type a response. Her own phone buzzed a second later. *can it wait until tomorrow?* he replied.

Not really, she sent back.

i've got plans with my folks tonight.

Okay, but it's about the incident with Anna.

Carol swore that, mirror or no mirror, she could *feel* the full force of Sitwell's frown radiating across the room. He stared at his phone, frozen; when Hill said something to him, he quickly shook his head. *tomorrow*, he replied, and then immediately put his phone back in his pocket.

She stared at the text for a long time before her eyes returned to the reflection in the crappy bar mirror. The couple had resumed their handholding, their conversation picking up with smiles and laughter, and Carol felt her fingers tighten around her phone. Like Barton, Sitwell'd pussy-footed around the Hill twins, convinced that a couple nice parent-teacher meetings might snap them into line. And why not? If standing up to those little shits meant he'd lose his ready access to—

“Are you hiding from me like you're one of Barnes's second-graders?” Jessica demanded suddenly, and Carol snapped her head away from the mirror to find her friend glaring at her, arms crossed. At least, until Jessica's lips twitched into a smile. “Get it? Because at the field trip, Billy —”

“I get it,” Carol answered tersely, but she felt her eyes drifting back to the mirror. She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs; even though the angle in the mirror was bad, she could see that Jessica was actively frowning at her. She sighed and dragged her hands through her hair.

Her anger was stupid, she reasoned. It was immature, because Sitwell was allowed to have a personal life.

Even if it was with the mother of the worst demon-children in the fifth grade, kids who tormented her students just to watch them cry, kids who wanted to make like Barton's neighbor-boys and watch the world burn, kids he was supposed to discipline instead of f—

“Carol?” Jessica asked, and Carol jerked her head back in her direction. The concern was plainly written on her face. “Did something happen while I was not texting my ex for an unsuccessful booty call?”

Carol snorted a little laugh. “You want to go to the pool hall?” she asked.

Jessica scowled. “You hate the pool hall. You called it the place where Army rejects go to get punched by women with twice their IQ.” She paused. “Or was that the American Legion hall with the BINGO nights?”

“I don't know,” Carol admitted, but she slid off her stool anyway. She tossed a couple bills on the bar to cover their drinks and shoved Jessica's purse at her. “I just need to go somewhere where punching people is probably okay.”

Jessica grinned. “I'll start texting the crew,” she announced, digging out her phone.

Carol glanced at her phone, too, and as they walked out, she opened a text to Clint.

On Monday, we are staging a coup.

She made it to James's house early Sunday afternoon. The plan was to watch some sporting event—basketball, hockey, whatever was on—but that was soon scrapped. The television was still broadcasting a game, but it was ignored first to consume pizza and debate over the best cop movies of all time. Currently the game was losing out to some making out and soon-to-be heavy petting.

Carol was content to lose herself in the contact. She shoved out thoughts of lesson plans, lying vice principals, and hiding from her feelings to just focus on touch and sound. Like how James seemed determined to kiss all the way around her jawline and back, and how whenever her fingernails scratched the nape of his neck, he let made this adorable little gasping noise.

Part of Carol's mind registered the sound of a pair car doors closing, but she was too distracted by James's fingers brushing underneath the hem of her t-shirt to care. The sound was pushed even further from her thoughts when she began to listen to the litany of filthy promises he was humming against her neck.

"Rhodey!" a voice shouted from outside the front door. It was quickly followed by three loud knocks. "I know you're in there! You promised to come out and play."

"Shit," James hissed as he pretty much shoved Carol off of his lap and onto the floor. Normally she would've been livid, but in that moment, she understood the reasoning.

She looked up at his wide, brown eyes and felt her stomach drop. Granted, it felt like that a moment ago, but this was for a different reason. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I double-booked myself," he sighed. "I forgot I was going to go to a car show with Tony and Pepper this afternoon."

"Tell them you're sick," she ordered.

"I can't," he whined with a helpless tone. "I haven't hung out with him since he set us up. He's been begging for the last two weeks." He sighed and ran his hand over his face. "We have to tell him eventually. I know he'll be insufferable, but—"

"Is that Danvers's car?" Tony shouted from the porch. It was followed by a whooping laugh and a moan. Carol knew what the sound effect of Pepper slugging Tony in the arm sounded like.

James looked down at her with an apologetic face. "Want to go to a car show?"

She didn't. But deep down she knew she didn't really have a choice. About the car show, sure, but not about hiding things any longer from one Tony Stark.

"Rhooooodeeeey," Tony sang. "Put your pants back on and open the door. You have twenty seconds before I start picking the lock."

"No one will be picking locks," Pepper shouted.

Carol heard her friend mutter something at Tony from the other side of the closed door but couldn't quite make out the words. It was probably a threat or five for her husband to behave, not that it would do much good.

James looked down at her as he held out a hand. "You ready for this?"

"Never," she answered as she grabbed hold of his fingers and let him pull her up to standing. "But I think if I sneak out the backdoor, he'll murder us both."

He didn't let go of her hand as he began to walk toward the front door, and she tried to swallow around the warm feelings that gave her. She wasn't entirely successful. James took a deep breath and threw her a wink before pulling the door open.

Carol watched Tony's eyes flicker from their clasped hands to her disheveled hair and swollen lips to James's emotionless face. "Friendly hello, my taut and shapely ass," he greeted.

"Tony," James sighed. "Won't you please come in?"

The man slowly entered the home, Pepper behind him mouthing *sorry*. Tony stared them both down for a moment with arms crossed over his chest before pointing a finger at James. "You are in some seriously deep shit." The finger slid over to point at Carol before he added, "You scare the hell out of me and could murder me I don't know how many ways, but know that the next time you want me to revive the ancient dinosaur of a computer in your classroom, I'm—"

"Going to deny my kids their right to learn using technology?" Carol finished for him with a tight voice and a raised eyebrow.

Tony swallowed hard and quickly pulled Pepper to stand in front of me. "Shield me from the mean lady."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Knock it off," she muttered. "What he's poorly trying to say is that whatever is happening between the two of you—which is none of our business," she added with a sharp look in her husband's direction, "we're happy for you."

"Still lied to me," Tony pointed out.

James's shoulders slumped. "Look, man, I wasn't trying to hurt you. We just wanted to keep things quiet for a while. I guess we're even now for you tricking us into a blind date."

"A blind date that obviously worked," Tony argued.

"And here we go," Carol sighed. They all looked at her, and she shook her head. "I don't want to deal with your ego, Stark. I don't want to see you dancing up and down the hallways at school doing your *I told you so* dance."

"I don't have an *I told you so* dance," Tony replied.

"You have three of them," Pepper muttered.

"Traitor," he grumbled before raising his hands in defeat. "You guys wanted to keep it a secret for a while? Fine. Kind of tired of both of my best friends hiding their girlfriends from me, but both said girlfriends could hand me my ass, so whatever. Who wants to go look at cars?"

"I'll grab our coats," James said.

"And for the record," Tony continued, "this is not a double date. But there will be a double date, and soon. And trying to get out of it will only increase my obnoxiousness."

Pepper and James led the way out to the car, but Tony blocked Carol's path out of the house.

"Tony," James warned, "don't start."

"Get in the car, Rhodes. You know she could kill me if she wanted to, it's fine." James shot her an apologetic look before following Pepper to the silver Audi.

Tony looked at her, and she never noticed really just how intense his stare could be—but then again, she'd never really had reason for it to be directed at her. "You remember what I said two days ago, right? How if you hurt him—"

Carol shook her head. "Tony—"

"No, seriously. I've known him forever and I've seen him through some shit, and I won't let that happen to him again."

"I won't let that happen," she promised quietly.

He tilted his head to study her further. "I'd believe you more if you didn't seem so hell bent on denying the fact that you have feelings for him." Without another word, he spun on his heel and made his way to the car, leaving Carol standing in the doorway trying to numb away the sting of his words.

Carol was stopped in Clint's doorway by the sight of him holding out his index finger to her in the universal sign of *gimme a sec*. "No war planning until I finish this cup of coffee," he told her. "What are we coup-ing about anyway?"

"Sitwell is a traitorous bastard and needs to be dealt with appropriately," she answered.

That brought Clint's head up from his desktop calendar, and he looked at her with confusion on his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's dating the enemy—Maria Hill."

Clint snorted into his coffee. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, and I have the cell phone pictures to prove it." She dug her phone out of her pocket and pulled up the series of images to show him. "If he's dating her, and you refuse to do anything more than give lectures in the hallway, how am I supposed to rely on any adults to help me out with the spawns of Satan?"

Clint shot her an unimpressed look. "Just because you don't believe in my tactics, doesn't mean they aren't effective." Carol rolled her eyes at that. "How was the rest of your weekend?"

She groaned as she sank into one of the seats. "Might as well tell you before Stark pays Darcy off to include it in the announcements." She paused to pick a few cat hairs off of her dress pants. "There's this guy."

Clint's eyebrows shot up towards his hairline. "A guy? Because I thought the last time you went out on a date you swore you were going to give into Plan B and just les it up with Jess Drew."

"Oh, she's still Plan B, but—"

Clint dissolved into laughter at Carol's hesitation to finish her sentence. "Hold on," he said once he caught his breath, "I have to get Phil down here. This is too good for him to miss."

Carol snatched the phone receiver out of his hand before he could dial the extension for the library. "You're such an ass."

"Wait," Clint said as he got his breathing fully under control. "Why would Tony pay Darcy to make an announcement about it? He catch you on a date like you did to Sitwell?"

“He’s the one who set us up.” Carol muttered it quickly towards the floor, still incredibly uncomfortable with people finding out that particular part of the story.

“Say that again,” Clint requested as he tapped his finger to his ear.

“I said, Tony was the one who set us up.”

Carol had to wait a full minute for Clint to compose himself again after he collapsed into the chair behind his desk. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he asked between gasps. “This is the greatest of all Monday mornings since that one time I woke up with Phil’s mouth—“

Carol scrunched up her face and waved her hands in a silent plea for him to never ever finish that story. “It was part of his Secret Santa gift to me—a ticket to a comedy show. What he didn’t tell me was that he gave the other ticket to his best friend.”

“When was this?”

“The show was about a month ago.”

Clint’s face slid into something a bit hard and hurt. “And you haven’t mentioned him until now?”

“I didn’t think—“

“That’s right you didn’t think. I’ve known you for years. When was the last time you saw a guy for this long? We’re work spouses. We tell each other everything.”

“There are times I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Carol murmured.

“C’mon, you have to give some details. Oh!” he exclaimed with a snap of his fingers. “We can do a double date.”

Carol groaned. “I just spent yesterday at a car show with Tony and Pepper, and he made sure to inform me multiple times that it did not count as an official double date and that one needed to happen soon. One that Tony is planning all by himself. It will probably involve food that I don’t know how to pronounce.”

Clint smirked. “Are we taking bets on how long it will take before he throws out the word *orgy*?”

“This is what I’m talking about,” she said as she threw her hands up in the air. “This is why I didn’t want anyone to find out about it.”

Clint stared her down with that creepy look that she swore could stare right into the soul of his students. “Sure Tony’s the only reason you didn’t mention him?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You and feelings—at least ones not related to rage—aren’t really the best of friends.”

“You’re like the seventeenth person to point that out in the last few days.”

Clint shoved his hands into his pockets with a shrug. “Plenty of people hide from their emotions. But life’s better when you don’t.”

“It’s also fucking terrifying,” Carol whispered.

“So are you.” The joke brought a ghost of a smile to her lips. “I’m serious about the double date

offer,” Clint said. “Come over to the house. Unlike whatever idea Tony’s cooking up, this won’t be anything fancy. I’ll grill steaks.”

“With that marinade that you won’t give anyone the recipe to?”

He grinned. “That’s the one. And I’ll make pesto mashed potatoes.”

“I could eat my weight in those,” she replied, her mouth already watering. “Ugh, fine. We’ll come over for dinner.”

“I just have to give my stamp of approval, that’s all. Not that you’ve cared too much about my opinion lately.”

Her shoulders slumped slightly in guilt. “I just don’t think hallway pep talks do the trick.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” He leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands on top of the desk. “Look, I care about Anna, too, and it pisses me off when one of my students bullies someone else. But there’s obviously a deeper issue going on here, and it’s not going to be fixed with one trip to the office.”

“Especially not when Sitwell’s banging the mom.”

Clint cringed. “Don’t make me think of him having sex ever again.” He swiped a hand over his face to clear the mental image before giving her a soft look. “We okay?”

“Yeah,” she answered.

“Good. And if Tony gets too out of control, just go hide in the library. Phil will protect you.”

“You okay?” James asked gently, raising his eyebrows.

Carol snorted. “This is just not what I expected from Tony Stark,” she replied, and he laughed.

When Tony’d first threatened a proper double-date before the car show—and then reminded her about it after—Carol’d pictured typical Tony Stark fare: a nine-course meal served in a dimly-lit private room and each dish paired with a wine that cost more than her monthly rent. Her panic had only increased when, on Wednesday morning, Tony’d sent out an e-mail that read, *7 p.m. tomorrow night, slinky attire not required but encouraged*. She’d texted James immediately and they’d spent most of the day guessing what Thursday night might entail.

“Maybe a helicopter ride,” James’d suggested when they’d met up for a drink after work, and Carol’d cocked an eyebrow at him. He’d shrugged. “Three of my birthdays, we went for a helicopter ride. I think he’s like one of those small dogs who likes to be up high so he feels tall.”

Even though Carol’d laughed so hard that she’d snorted beer out her nose, he’d still kissed her goodnight in the parking lot. Several times.

Needless to say, the last thing Carol’d expected was—

“Can anyone actually recover from a seven-ten split?” Tony demanded, throwing himself into the plastic bowling alley seat between Carol and Pepper. He slung his arms around the both of them and then ignored when Carol smacked his hand away. On Carol’s other side, James rolled his eyes and dragged himself up for his turn. “You hear about it from professionals, and I can do it on Wii Bowling—”

“Because that proves anything,” James shot back over his shoulder, and Carol grinned at him.

“—but I think it’s really all a lie that’s fed to us so we’ll keep sticking our feet into crappy thirty-year-old shoes and buying overpriced bowling alley beer.” He tipped his head over in Carol’s direction. “By the way, nice skirt. I didn’t think you owned one.”

Pepper stopped drinking her overpriced beer to narrow her eyes at him. “Tony.”

“I’m not being snide, I’m actually paying her a compliment,” he insisted, and Carol rolled her eyes. She also recrossed her legs. She didn’t usually wear skirts—she felt conspicuous in them, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing—but the slinky attire part of the e-mail’d thrown her off. When she crossed her arms over her chest, though, Tony raised his hands in defense. “They made me promise not to be snide,” he promised, and Carol felt her jaw tighten. “I think they were texting behind our backs, Rhodey and Pep. Sort of ‘best behavior, no asking about our sex life’ kinds of things.”

“You can ask, but nobody’s going to tell you,” James offered as he wandered back to the seating area. Carol raised her eyes to confirm that, yes, he was *still* beating Tony.

“And I’ll never discourage them from texting each other if it keeps you on your best behavior,” Carol retorted, leaving Tony to gape at her while a laughing Pepper stood up to bowl.

James settled down next to her, flashing her a grin, and she actually grinned back. All through dinner (at a burger place that Carol’d wanted to try for months) she’d felt off-balance, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Every question Tony asked and every eyebrow he quirked seemed like the gateway drug to intrusive questions she desperately didn’t want to answer, and she’d braced herself for impact like she was back in flight training. Instead, though, Tony actually behaved like a normal human being—charming, disarmingly funny, legitimately *fun*—and Carol felt her nerves start to uncoil. If Tony planned on digging any deeper into her intentions with her friend, he wasn’t doing it tonight.

She wondered how much Pepper and James’s text message conversation had to do with that.

She stepped up to bowl after Pepper, hitting her first strike in the game, and returned to the horseshoe of seats to find the other couple missing in action. “Bathroom break,” James reported as she sat back down. He topped off their plastic cups of beer from the pitcher. “I told them they’ve got a five minute time limit.”

She laughed. “Five minutes is probably twice what Tony needs,” she returned, and James covered his mouth to keep from spitting beer. When he swallowed and could laugh, it overtook his entire face, warm in the dim bowling alley lights, and Carol threw caution to the wind to grab him by the collar of his shirt and kiss him.

His mouth tasted like hops and spice, familiar and still exhilarating, and for the first couple seconds, she felt like a teenager on her first date, warm from the inside out. She remembered her conversation with Clint about how she never dated a guy this long—she always found some fundamental flaw, some reason to dive in the opposite direction like hiding from gunfire—and instead of it chasing her away, it drove her closer to him. James sighed into her mouth, his hand finding her thigh at the hem of her skirt, and only the knowledge that they were in public kept her from pushing his hand further up her leg.

Jessica’d once sneered at her, “For a pilot, you’re pretty afraid of flying.”

She finally understood what that meant, right now.

A long, low whistle pulled her out of whatever greedy, kiss-fueled trance she'd fallen into, and when she and James jerked apart, it was to find Tony and Pepper standing over them. Pepper smiled, sheepish and knowing at the same time, but Tony—

Tony cackled, hands on his hips. "I hope you both remember to thank me as both the best man *and* matchmaker at the upcoming wedding, you sly and horny dogs."

Carol flipped him off as she slid all the way back into her plastic chair, aware that James hadn't quite removed his hand from her leg yet. "The first time I walked in on you and Pepper mauling each other, I didn't start planning the wedding," he commented.

"I'd usually be offended by that, all sputtering and horrible and whatever, but tonight I'm gloating." He pointed a finger at James. "Anthony Edward Rhodes is a great name for your first-born child, you know."

"Never in your life," James replied, and Tony laughed as he headed back up to bowl.

He was still lining up his shot—"Like you'll ever bowl a turkey," James called to him, to which he shot back, "Don't care, gloating"—when Pepper settled into the seat beside Carol. "He'll never admit it, but the closet romantic in him is very happy right now," she said, and both Carol and James turned to look at her. She smiled warmly. "I can't tell you how many times in the last few days I've caught him grinning like the cat who ate the canary."

"I'm pretty sure that's his default expression," Carol replied, shaking her head.

"Maybe," Pepper admitted, "but trust me. It's a good thing."

"Uh, of *course* it's a good thing, I came up with the idea," Tony announced, flopping back down next to Pepper. "Because if this Rhodey thing hadn't worked out, I would've had to try to hook Danvers up with Bruce, and *that* would've involved breaking up he and Red—not that I knew he and Red were a thing at the time all these balls started rolling—and—"

"You can stop talking any time now," Carol informed him.

"For my best friend's girl? Anything," Tony replied, and James paused in picking up his bowling ball to offer Carol a long, genuine, heart-stopping smile.

Coupling

Tony leaned his hip against the counter containing the all-precious coffee maker in the faculty lounge early Wednesday morning. “Did Lover Boy tell you about my great plan? Because it’s a great plan.”

Carol Danvers shot him a look so dark and evil that he may have felt his balls retract slightly into his body. “One—don’t call him that. Two—I’m not turning every Sunday into ‘Hang out with Tony’ time.”

Tony rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner. “Did Rhodey fail to mention that this is an *annual* brunch?”

Carol snorted. “Please, we all know how you are. Payday happy hours were supposed to be a once-a-month thing until you demanded it happen every other week. Pretty sure you’d want it to happen daily if Pepper wasn’t around to rein you in.”

His jaw dropped and his hands went to his chest in a display of mock horror, but deep down, they both knew she was right. “You’re still coming though, right?”

“You’re paying for the booze? I’ll be there.” She was almost out the door before she spun on her heel and leveled a glare at him. “James told me about the dress code. If you’re lying about that to put me in a skirt when no one else—“

“Not a lie.” Tony even went so far as to make a cross over his heart. “And for what it’s worth, you looked awesome in that skirt.” He was pretty sure Carol flipping him the bird wasn’t the best way to say *thank you*, but it was all he was going to get.

He snagged a cup of caffeinated sludge for himself and burrowed into his coat before stepping outside for bus duty. The other specials teachers were huddled together on the sidewalk. “Perfect,” Tony announced. “I can kill four birds with one stone.” The teachers stepped out of the circle to let him in and gave him expectant looks. “This Sunday, ten-thirty, Four Seasons. Bring your respective hotties—or Bartons—for the First Annual Everybody’s Getting Laid So Let’s Eat and Celebrate Extravaganza.”

“It’s never a good sign when he uses the word *extravaganza*,” Coulson muttered.

“Hey,” Tony argued. “It’s going to be a classy extravaganza. Pepper’s doing most of the detail work—“

“You mean she’s putting limits on what you can and can’t do,” Natasha pointed out.

“—so you know it’s not going to be too overboard,” Tony finished.

“Please tell me there isn’t going to be an event involving a fish bowl and car keys,” Steve said.

Tony shook his head. “We’d have to have multiple fish bowls based on orientation. And we know how your fish bowl would end up, but I’m sure you and Coulson wouldn’t mind the excuse to act on your mutual man crushes.” He ignored the joint eye roll he was given from the librarian and the art teacher and turned to Natasha. “How do you think it would go between Bucky and Barton?”

“There’d be a lot of talking,” she answered.

May Parker shrugged. "I'd still watch it."

Tony's grin increased in size threefold. "I want to be you when I grow up, you know that right?"

"Please, you couldn't handle being me," May responded before sauntering off to meet the first bus that pulled into the asphalt loop in front of the school.

Once all the kids were safely inside the building and the buses had pulled away, Tony snuck into the main office for his last round of invitations. Thankfully, he was able to catch Darcy between phone calls of parents letting the school know about their sick kids. "Hey," he greeted, "quick thing."

"Has to be quick, announcements are in ninety seconds."

He raised his hands in a surrendering gesture. "Wouldn't dream of depriving you of the favorite part of your day. This Sunday, Four Seasons, couples brunch. You and Fabio's brother are more than welcome to join in."

"What are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "You're dating Thor's brother. It's all the Odinchildren talk about. I mean Girl Odinson even showed me how she's practicing walking down the aisle when she gets to be the flower girl at the wedding, and the boys ask if I have cousins and, if so, what I do with them."

"Oh, god, please stop talking," Darcy moaned. Her head went into her hands, but before it did, Tony noticed her pale skin had become even more translucent.

"Look, I know the kid thing is a lot, but even I can admit there are worse families to marry into."

"Stop. Talking." She took a moment to compose herself before looking up once more at Tony. "We're not dating."

"I'd hope not, because if we were Pepper would murder both of us. I mean, if she wasn't around—God forbid—it's not like I wouldn't think of asking you out, if I were wanting to check off the *uber-young* square on my dating Bingo card, but—"

"Oh my god!" she shouted at him. "Stop." She took a deep breath and looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to them after her outburst. "I'm not dating Loki."

"Who's Loki?"

"Thor's brother. We are *not* dating."

"That's not what word on the street is. Sounds like you either need to start hitting that, or you've got some 'splaining to do, Lucy."

"No sh—kidding," she sighed.

Bruce turned in his empty classroom to find Natasha hovering in the doorway. Her hands were buried in her black fleece coat's pockets and snowflakes from an early spring snow were melting in her hair and eyelashes. The snowburst, as the news media had called it to sensationalize things, had hit at just the right time in the late morning to have the district worry about buses running during the school day. As a result, he'd had his morning kids all day. They'd been a giant ball of crazy beyond excited to spend a whole day at school like the "big kids" or in near tears because they

were terrified they'd have to stay at school forever. After a few hours of extreme cat herding and making up lessons on the fly, seeing Natasha with red cheeks and messy hair—as soft as she could ever look at work—was a most welcome sight.

“Hi,” he breathed.

She slipped into his room and shut the door behind her. “Tony come talk to you this morning?”

“The brunch thing? Yeah. Why?”

She shrugged. “We haven't really done the couply thing. At least, not around others. I don't even know who all knows we're together.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and rolled from his balls of his feet back to his heels as he thought about it. “Tony does, and obviously Pepper.”

Natasha nodded. “She texted me last weekend that Tony kept talking about how you're dating ‘Red’ to Carol and the guy she's with, but Carol hasn't mentioned anything to me about it.”

“She was probably too busy plotting Tony's death to put two and two together,” Bruce reasoned.

“Probably.”

“You told James, right?” he asked.

“I tell James everything.” He raised his eyebrows in a challenge, and she rolled her eyes. “Not *everything*. He'd feel the need to reciprocate, and there some things I never want to know about Steve. Ever.”

Bruce smiled. “But Steve knows too?”

“Sure. And Clint and Phil. They keep asking when you're going to join us for weekly Tuesday dinners.”

A hand left his pocket to twirl in the air, a trait he undoubtedly picked up from Tony. He tried to come up with an answer other than the truth of *I don't want to face a firing squad*, but nothing come out of him.

“Wuss,” she said.

“Pretty much.”

“Clint said that if you keep it up it's obvious you don't care about the cow and only want free milk.”

“And where exactly did you leave a bruise on him for calling you a cow?” The sparkle in her eyes was all he needed for confirmation that she'd left him with a mark. “I promise I'll come to dinner. Eventually.”

“I don't care. We see enough of each other here; I don't know why we need to hang out all the time outside of work.”

He nodded, but didn't respond. He and Clint were the ones who'd been at the school the longest in their circle of friends, and Bruce could clearly remember what life was like when you didn't have much of a social life outside of work. He was grateful for the way things were now and the found family he'd adopted.

“Who does that leave?” Bruce asked.

She gave a half-shrug. “Depends on who he invited. For sure Carol and the Street guy.”

“Rhodes,” Bruce quietly corrected.

“The Coulsons,” Natasha continued as she counted couples off on her fingers. “James and Steve, us, obviously the Starks.”

“What about Peter Parker?”

Natasha’s head tilted to one side as she considered the thought briefly. “I don’t think so. The Parker kid can be a little... bouncy. I think Tony’s worried that he might break a valuable or something.”

“May seeing anyone?”

She snorted. “May doesn’t usually date someone; she usually dates someones. Don’t think she’ll be there.”

“I think Tony mentioned Darcy when he rambled a list of invitees to me this morning.”

A single red eyebrow arched at the statement. “Darcy’s seeing someone?”

“According to George Odinson, she’s practically married to his Uncle Loki.”

He watched the barely-there signs of Natasha’s thoughts churning a moment before she shook her head. “If Darcy was getting laid, we’d all know about it.”

Bruce nodded and shifted his gaze to the kidney-shaped table to his right. The surface was littered with this week’s advanced reading selection, *Fox and His Friends*. He tried to distract himself with studying the cover of the books, but his mind could only think about how to carefully craft his next question.

“Do you not want people to know we’re together?” He didn’t realize the words had left him till he heard her take in a quick breath. Slowly, his eyes rose to meet hers, but the contact only held for a second before it was her turn to look away.

“I—“ She paused to sigh and run fingers through her hair. “You know how when you were a kid and wanted to show off a new toy, but you were terrified to take it with you to school because some other kid might break it?”

“Not really.”

“Me neither, but I swear I break up that kind of fight at least three times a week on the playground.” Quietly and slowly, she crossed the distance between them. “I like what we have, and it’s special to me.”

“But you don’t want to share it with others?” he asked skeptically.

Her shoulders slumped at his question. “Bruce, we friend-fucked our way into a relationship. It’s not the best start to a *this is how we became a couple* story.”

“So? Tony and Pepper married over a false positive on a pregnancy test. Phil only agreed to a date after Clint spent a year physically throwing himself at him. Who cares how the story starts?”

She picked at her nail polish while softly answering. “I don’t want them to think badly of you.”

He gently nudged her chin up to look him in the eye. “The people I care about the most know how we started, and they don’t care. And neither do I. I am by far the luckiest man in the world. If I were Tony, I’d be renting every bulletin boards within a hundred miles and plaster your picture on them with the caption *I’m dating her*.” He ignored the look she gave him and kept talking. “But even doing that wouldn’t be able to convey what an amazing and strong person you are.”

She stepped forward and leaned into him. He tensed at her still-cold nose leeching heat from his neck. “Don’t deserve you,” she whispered as her arms snaked around his waist.

“You really don’t,” he joked as he hugged around the shoulders. His foot was able to move out of the way in time to avoiding her stomping his toes.

“You know we’re not a couple, right?” Darcy asked, and Loki stopped chewing.

The whole way to the movie theater, she’d run through the conversation in her head, playing and replaying until she had everything perfect. She figured she’d lead into it gracefully, talk about how much she enjoyed getting to know Loki and watching movies in his cramped little apartment and talking until two in the morning, and how she really, honestly wanted to spend time with him long-term. And once he got all sweet and soft-eyed—not exactly something she’d pictured from Thor’s unapproachable brother, at least before she’d gotten to know him—she’d segue into the part about how she really wanted them to just be *friends*.

Except then, he’d paid for her tickets, again. And bought them a popcorn to share—again. And touched her arm every time he spotted an Easter egg throwback to the previous couple movies (which they maybe marathoned all last weekend), and held the door for her at the burger place, and ordered the appetizer she liked best even though he’d complained the last three times about not liking it, and—

The words’d just jumped out of her mouth, okay?

Across the table, Loki swallowed. He reached for his beer afterward, and Darcy poked the puddle of ketchup on her plate with a fry.

“That maybe came out a little wrong,” she said after a painfully long stretch of silence.

“Did it really? I hadn’t noticed.” His voice sounded cold and snide, and she looked up to glare at him. When she raised her eyebrows at him, he sighed. “And that was perhaps a bit unfair.”

“You think?”

“You tell me, as you’re the one so concerned with our relationship.”

“Our— Loki, we don’t have a relationship!” She threw up her hands. “Your nephews have been telling everyone who will listen that I’m your girlfriend, and every time I try to prove them wrong, they have more reasons. The cupcake that one night, the flowers after I had that fight with Mom—” He dropped his eyes to his plate at that one. “—the ‘joint’ present from the two of us when Alva was throwing up last weekend. We’re way past the point where they’ll believe me when I say we’re not together.”

“They’re children.”

“They’re children who’ve told all my coworkers that we’re together. People who invited me and

my boyfriend—that I don’t have—to Sunday brunch.” He flinched a little, and Darcy dragged her fingers through her hair. “Look, I just— You know, right?”

“Know what?”

“That we’re not actually together.”

He shrugged. “Certainly,” he replied tightly, and went back to his burger.

Darcy watched him eat in silence for a couple minutes, her own burger untouched and a weird feeling churning around in the bottom of her stomach. She pushed her plate away to lean her arms on the table, but he kept his eyes focused somewhere around the base of his beer bottle. “Loki,” she said. He kept chewing. “Loki, can we at least talk instead of you being all—that?”

She waved a hand at him, and he finally glanced up. Her throat felt a whole lot thicker and stickier when she realized how distant and sort of lost he looked. “I’m not sure I can stop being whatever it is you don’t like,” he said quietly.

“That’s not what I—”

“That’s the point of this conversation, isn’t it? To remind me that our time together falls short of whatever you’re looking for? Because trust me, I understand perfectly now that you’ve explained it so succinctly.”

“Oh, for the— Are you listening to me, or are you just starting at butthurt and going from there?” Darcy demanded. Loki blinked at her for a second, and she rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I said butthurt.”

“You swore you’d never say it again after *Skyfall*.”

“I’m sorry, but Silva was totally the textbook definition of butthurt, and that will never change,” she retorted, and he laughed quietly. She pushed her arms forward far enough that she could poke the back of his hand, grinning when he glanced up at her. “I like you a lot,” she said gently.

“You’re fun to be around, and kind of great at dragging me out of my whole mopey adulthood-deferred sulking *thing*. I don’t have to be *on* all the time when we hang out.” He smiled, and she poked him again. “But I don’t— I mean, we’re not really—”

She waved her hand again, and Loki’s lips quirked into a tiny smirk. “You’ve never let someone down easy before, I take it?”

“Are you kidding? I’m the girl who always has to hear the *you’re a really great friend, emphasis on that last word* speech.” He chuckled, and she scowled at him. “What?”

He shook his head. “I cannot fathom someone only wanting to be your platonic friend.”

“Trust me, it happens. All the time. The last guy I made out with before you was Jane’s creepy intern.” When Loki raised his eyebrows, she pointed a finger at him. “No. No, that is a story for when I’ve had a whole bottle of cheap wine and am laying on your living room floor.”

Loki finally laughed. “That can be arranged,” he replied, and it sounded a lot like a promise. When his laughter died away, though, the lost expression flooded his face again. “Generally,” he continued, “I hear quite a bit about how I am good enough company but nothing worth the long-term effort of a relationship. There’s usually an empty promise that we’ll still be friends, followed by—”

“Uh, not an empty promise,” Darcy cut him off, and he pressed his lips together. She resisted the

urge to roll her eyes. “I mean it. I like hanging out with you. I just can’t see us, you know, jumping into bed together. I mean, unless we were both really drunk and needed to sleep somewhere softer than your awful futon.” His mouth quirked into a smile. “I don’t want to stop hanging out with you, I just want to make sure we’re on the same page *with* our hanging out.”

“We are on the same page,” he agreed, nodding. He glanced away for a second, staring out the window. “To be honest, I suspected that you— Well. I’ll just say that I suspected we had different aspirational goals for our friendship.” His gaze flickered back to her. “But I had hoped you genuinely wanted to at least be friends.”

Darcy grinned. “I don’t marathon a fantasy series for just *any* old friend, you know,” she replied, and the light finally hit his eyes when he grinned back.

They were walking out to the car after finally—*finally*—splitting the dinner bill when Loki asked, “Which one of us should explain our non-relationship to my niece and nephews?”

Scowling, she glanced up at him. “Whoever loses our next game of Words with Friends,” she answered, and then elbowed him when he grinned.

“I don’t know which one I like better: the e-mail tilted ‘sleeping with the enemy,’ or the one that says ‘I know who you did last Saturday.’”

Carol glanced up from the middle school testing forms she was starting to prepare for her fifth graders and discovered Jasper Sitwell standing in her doorway, his cell phone dangling from his fingers. They stared at each other for a moment, his eyes sharp behind his glasses and her face blissfully innocent—at least she hoped—until he crossed into her closet of a classroom.

Then, she rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.

“Yeah, you do,” he replied, and she turned back to the forms. “You can’t play dumb. I thought maybe Drew got into your e-mail to screw with both of us, but then I reread them. She definitely doesn’t know how to spell *backstabbing fuck*.”

Carol bristled. “You know that’s my best friend, right?”

“Yes, like I know you’re pissed at me and dealing with it like a twelve-year-old girl.” She snorted at him. The next time she looked up from her forms, he was looming in front of her desk. “You going to tell me what I did?”

“Take a stab in the dark.”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t’ve dragged my ass all the way up here to ask you,” he shot back. She rolled her eyes again and shoved the forms out of the way. Sitwell raised his eyebrows. “Okay, see, now I know I’ve pissed you off, because that—”

“You’re sleeping with Maria Hill,” Carol spat, and Sitwell shut right up.

The anger in her own voice made her flinch, and when he flinched too, she heaved a sigh and pushed up out of her chair. She’d spent a day and a half trying to figure out how to talk to Sitwell about his stupid dinner date with Hill. She’d even stooped to the all-time low of describing the situation to Jessica (without using names, because Jessica’d never quite learned how to keep a secret).

Her friend’d laughed at her. “Confront him without confronting him!” she’d goaded, and handed

Carol another too-full glass of red wine. “Enhanced interrogation techniques. Drop hints and watch him squirm.”

They’d finished the bottle of wine before Carol’d sent the e-mails.

Her head, in retaliation for the wine, ached all day.

She dragged her hand through her hair and paced across her classroom. “You’re supposed to be stopping these kids from terrorizing their classmates—great job of that, by the way—and then the second anyone turns their back, you’re out wining and dining their mother. Super professional.”

“Says the woman who sent me cryptic e-mails,” Sitwell retorted tightly.

Carol pointed a finger at him. “Don’t change the subject.”

“What subject?” he demanded, raising his hands. Thinly-disguised anger crept into his tone. “Are you accusing me of doing something improper? Because last I checked, nothing said I can’t date another consenting adult who happens to have kids in our damn school.” Carol felt her jaw tighten, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Or maybe you’re saying that I’m not dealing with Colin and Keith’s bullshit. Is that it? Because every time they’ve even inched across the line, I’ve—”

“They’re menaces to society, Sitwell!” she interrupted. He rolled his eyes, and she jabbed her finger toward him again. “No, they are. They look for the weakest kid in the crowd and they pick her off every time. And now, they’re going to look at the guy who’s supposed to stop them from doing this and realize that there’s no line anymore because he’s screwing around with their mother!”

Sitwell’s jaw clenched, his shoulders squaring. “We’re dating, not going to some goddamn sex club in fishnets, so don’t—”

She scoffed. “Does it matter?”

“Yes!” For the first time in the conversation, his voice raised past the point of practiced control, and Carol felt her mouth snap shut. His hands clenched, and he dug them into his hips. “I know you’re not really one for the milk of human fucking kindness—”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, go to *hell*, Jasper.”

“—but have you ever stopped for five minutes to think that maybe they’re also little ass clowns outside this building? That maybe she’s gotten dealt a shit sandwich and she’s doing the best she can?” Carol started to open her mouth, and he shook his head. “No. Because when you work with Carol Danvers, there are two ways to do things: her way, or no goddamn way at all.”

The last words hit Carol in the gut like a lead weight, but Jasper ignored how hard she swallowed to step up in front of her. They stared at each other, his eyes dark and his hands still gripping hard at his hips. “I am still doing my job,” he said simply. “If they hurt someone, I will deal with them. If that means I call their mom and bring her in, then that’s what I do. The kids here are a lot more important than my fucking relationship.” He paused, his lips pressing together for a second. “I just thought you knew that about me already.”

“Jasper,” Carol started to say, but he shook his head and, turning on his heel, strode right out of the classroom. The door slammed hard behind him, leaving her standing there, her fingernails digging into her forearm and her eyes trained on the closed door.

When she was sure he wouldn’t come back in, she kicked her chair hard enough that it smacked it

into the wall. “*Dammit.*”

Darcy swore so long and hard when Loki played *qintars* on a triple word score that her mother came to see what was the matter. “Fucking cheater,” she’d muttered repeatedly once she’d convinced her mom that everything was fine. Not that Darcy could blame him for pulling out the big guns during their game, but she wasn’t at all eager to have to break Odinbaby hearts with the news that she and Loki weren’t actually going to be together forever.

She sent a text to Thor, knowing Jane would be out of town presenting at a conference, to see if she could bring some pizzas over for dinner and have a little chat. Part of her felt a little crappy for padding the news with pepperoni and cheese, but she was a Lewis and eating your feelings was just a law of the universe. Her crappy feelings only increased in size when Alva greeted her at the door with “Where’s Uncle Loki? Isn’t he with you?”

Darcy’d spent dinner listening to the kids talk about what had happened at school that week, especially George and Alva’s adventures of getting to stay at school for the whole day on Wednesday. Henry talked about his classmate’s birthday and how the entire class was invited to go roller skating tomorrow. Darcy nodded and laughed in all the appropriate places, but she didn’t miss how quiet Thor was or how he avoided looking at her. Once everyone was finished, she conned the kids into helping her with the dishes by turning it into a game. When George asked if they could have one of the cookies she’d baked that afternoon, Darcy answered, “We need to chat first. To the couch!”

The kids raced to snag their seats and settled themselves with minimal shoving. Darcy cleared a spot on the coffee table so she could face them all, and she tried not to feel nervous at the way Thor slowly eased himself into the armchair to her left. “What are we talking about?” Alva asked as she swung her legs over the edge of the cushion.

“We need to talk about me and your Uncle Loki,” Darcy answered.

“Are you going to babysit us again?” Henry asked. “I mean, it’s cool when it’s just you, but it’s really fun when both of you are here.”

“No, I don’t know if—“

“Do we all get to go to the movies?” George nearly-shouted to be heard. “Uncle Loki said if we were really good, you and him would take us to see a movie.”

“No, and he never told me about that.”

“Are you in love?” Alva stretched the last word out for all of its worth.

“No,” Darcy snapped frustration, all the words she planned and rehearsed flying out the window. She really just needed to stop trying to plan speeches. At least on the topic of breaking hearts, apparently. “No, we’re not in love,” she said in a gentler tone, but it still wasn’t soft enough to keep Alva’s face from sliding into something akin to the disappointment of crushed dreams. “Look,” Darcy sighed as she ran fingers through her hair. “Your uncle and I are good friends, and that’s all we’ve ever been. He’s never been my boyfriend, and he’s never going to be my boyfriend.”

“But you kissed,” Henry argued. “If a boy kisses you, then that makes them your boyfriend.”

“Guys, it’s not that simple. Don’t get me wrong—your uncle is awesome. I totally want to be friends with him and hang out, but we’re not dating.” She paused to look at Alva. “And we’re definitely not going to get married.”

“But we’ve been telling everyone that you’re dating,” George complained.

“Yeah, don’t I know it. If you could not do that anymore, I’d appreciate it.”

“Why don’t you want to date Uncle Loki?” Alva asked quietly.

Darcy didn’t know what hurt more: her tone of voice, or the way her face screamed of impending tears. She reached over to rest a hand on the girl’s tiny knee. “Sometimes you meet people, and they are just awesome. But even though you get along really well and hang out all the time together, you still may not want to kiss them. It doesn’t make them any less awesome, it’s just that that’s all the further the relationship is going to go.”

“Can we eat cookies now?” George whined, clearly over the conversation.

“Yeah, sure.”

Once the kids consumed the sweets, Darcy made sure she was still welcome at George and Henry’s indoor soccer game the next day, which she thankfully was. When the boys ran off to change into their pajamas, Darcy noticed Alva was still in her seat with her chin tucked to her chest. Darcy shot a look at Thor, but he just ground his jaw and shook his head. “Hey,” Darcy said as she poked Alva in the arm. “You okay?”

When she looked up at Darcy, her eyes were wet. “I’ve been practicing to be your flower girl.”

Darcy’s shoulders slumped, and she felt like a pile of shit. “C’mere,” she said as she waved the girl over. She pulled Alva onto her lap, and the girl burrowed her face in her chest. “Listen, when I get married, you are guaranteed to be my flower girl. Even if you’re thirty when it happens, you can totally be my flower girl. And hey—when your Uncle Loki finds someone more awesome than me, which is not that hard, you can totally be his flower girl, too. That doubles your chances at flower girling.” She brushed curls out of the girl’s face and Alva met her eyes with a sniffle. “You still mad at me?”

“Guess not.”

“Good,” Darcy replied with a hug. “Because I would absolutely hate it if you were mad at me.”

Thor shooed her away to put her pajamas on, and Darcy put on her coat. Thor walked her to the door, and Darcy could no longer stand how quiet he had been all night. “I take it you’re pissed at me, too?”

He sighed before answering. “I do not like seeing my brother hurt; it doesn’t bring up pleasant memories. But,” he added as he looked her in the eye, “it was quite nice giving into the hope that you would become an official member of the family. We all love you; we’d be extremely proud to have you around permanently.” He shrugged his mighty shoulders. “Alva was not the only one hoping to take part in a wedding.”

Darcy wrapped her arms around his waist and smiled when his arms landed on her shoulders. “Love you, too, Big Guy.”

“That might be the greatest thing you’ve ever told me,” Clint laughed, and Phil rolled his eyes as he accepted a mimosa from the waiter.

Phil knew he should have expected Tony Stark’s so-called *First Annual and Very Official Couple’s Brunch* to be ostentatious and ridiculous, but he still hadn’t expected Tony to go this level of

overboard. Rather than just arranging a group brunch reservation at the local Four Seasons like a normal person, Tony'd rented out one of the side rooms. A massive table covered with still-empty warming pans—enough that the food that belonged inside could probably feed a small island nation—stretched along one wall, plush couches and chairs were arranged along the other, and a number of windows overlooked the hotel courtyard and the barely-there dusting of snow from the other afternoon. Another enormous table in the middle of the room boasted ten place settings. Waiters wandered by, offering mimosas, iced tea, and various bacon-wrapped appetizers.

Clint helped himself to three water chestnuts and handed one to Phil.

Carol Danvers, on the other hand, rolled her eyes. "I just told you that I practically skinned Sitwell alive," she replied.

"And I would've paid money to see it," Clint responded. "Did Drew get it on camera or anything?"

"I hate you," she muttered.

He pointed his water chestnut at her. "You love me, you just hate to admit it."

"Okay, so, first rule of Brunch Club is that there are no weird threesomes or foursomes at Brunch Club unless Bruce and Red are looking for a genius and his super sexy wife," Tony suddenly interrupted, appearing between Carol and Clint. A tall man in a dark green dress shirt and black slacks stood at his side. "Rhodey, I think you know your girlfriend—"

"You have the subtlety of a train wreck," Carol muttered.

"—but since this is the last stop on the handshake rounds until Rogers and Barnes decide to climb out of their sex hovel and join us: former Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes, meet Clint Barton and his little wife, Philomena."

Clint's gaze unsubtly swept over Rhodes's body before he swallowed without chewing. "*This* is the guy you're dating?" he asked.

"Crime against humanity, I know, but he likes girls who can beat him up in bed." Tony deftly stepped away from Rhodes's glare. "I think I hear a friend who doesn't want to murder me calling."

"Do you actually have those?" Phil asked.

Tony scowled at him. "I'm not dignifying that with a response."

"It means no," Rhodes replied dryly, and Phil couldn't help grinning. Carol rolled her eyes slightly, a smile poking at the corners of her mouth; it only grew when the man at her side pressed his hand to her back. "You telling your friends about your faux pas with the assistant principal?" he asked once Tony had trotted away.

"Did *you* get it on video?" Clint asked in response. Carol huffed and grabbed a drink from the nearest passing waiter while the rest of them laughed. "But seriously," he pressed, "you can't burn a bridge with Sitwell. That'll bite you in the ass in record time."

"I think someone else you know told you that last night," Rhodes commented.

Carol elbowed him lightly, and he grinned. "Do you think I don't know all this?" she demanded. Clint, Rhodes, and Phil himself all raised eyebrows at her, and she sighed. "I just can't believe the nerve of him. He doesn't just pick a mom, he picks *their* mom. And I don't care what he says,

there's no way to totally separate relationship and work when you're disciplining your girlfriend's kids."

"Maybe," Clint replied, "but you've gotta remember that the heart wants what the heart wants."

Rhodes snorted slightly. "You get that off a bumper sticker or something?"

"Fortune cookie, actually," Phil provided.

Clint knocked their shoulders together, the toothpick from his last water chestnut hanging off his bottom lip. "Somebody's not getting his post-brunch blowjob if he keeps that up."

"Somebody else has forgotten that his threat can be reciprocated," Phil retorted. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Carol and Rhodes grinning, but he was too focused on Clint's cheeky little smirk to really care. When he turned back to the other couple, though, he shrugged. "Clint's right, though," he added. "You can't always choose who you're attracted to—or the baggage they bring along with them. Jasper's reasonable. He won't pick his girlfriend over his job. He knows better."

"Unless," Clint chimed in, "she puts out after brunch. Unlike some people I know."

Rhodes laughed, and Carol rolled her eyes. "I am so ashamed of knowing you people," she grumbled. Clint beamed at her and stole another water chestnut from the next tray that passed by.

When Steve and Bucky finally wandered into the room a few minutes later—the latter with hair definitely belonging to a "sex hovel"—Carol muttered *better beat Tony to it* and dragged Rhodes away to meet them. Phil finished off the last sip of his mimosa just as Clint leaned bodily against his arm. "Word on the street is that Darcy broke off her not-relationship with Odinson's kid brother," he commented quietly.

Phil glanced over. "What street is that the word on?"

"The one where she keeps Old Hottie in the loop so I'll play sand volleyball in her league again this summer and take off my shirt."

He flashed Phil a winning grin, and Phil shook his head. "No more mimosas."

"Says the guy who's still in the running for some post-brunch hanky-panky," Clint retorted. Something caught his eye, though, and he grabbed Phil's hand to drag him across the room less than a full second later. Phil almost protested until he realized that the commotion from Steve and Bucky arriving had left Natasha and Bruce standing alone by the windows.

They were talking quietly and only really noticed Clint and Phil approach when Clint gently pressed his shoulder against Natasha's. Phil decided he'd definitely need to track Clint's mimosa intake for the rest of the morning.

"The over-under on you two showing up was pretty sketchy," he said.

"He means he's glad to see you," Phil offered.

Clint frowned at him, but both Bruce and Natasha smiled. "I think we at least speak conversational Barton by now," Bruce said.

"There's no such thing as conversational gibberish," Natasha returned. Phil caught laughter dancing in the corners of her eyes, though, and he couldn't help but smile. "Did Phil already cut you off the free booze?"

“No,” Clint answered.

“Yes,” Phil corrected. Clint flashed him his best puppy-dog eyes, and he ignored it to glance between Bruce and Natasha. They stood just far enough apart that their shoulders didn’t brush. “It’s good you came,” he commented after a few seconds.

“I think Tony had a three-step plan to drag us here if we didn’t volunteer,” Bruce replied, dropping his eyes toward his glass of iced tea.

“It was at least five steps,” Natasha returned, flashing him a sneaky, bright-eyed glance. Bruce snorted a little laugh, his mouth curling into a smile. Phil couldn’t remember the last time he’d witnessed Natasha sharing a private joke with someone besides Clint and Bucky—two men who practically counted as her brothers. After a moment, though, she shrugged. “I figured if you can take Clint out into public all the time, the least we can do is come to brunch.”

“Hey!” Clint protested. He held a toothpick dangling the second half of a bacon-wrapped date. “I’m a delightful brunch partner.”

Phil raised his eyebrows. “You’ve mentioned post-brunch sex acts once every ten minutes since we got up this morning.”

“So less frequently than usual,” Bruce noted. Natasha snorted a laugh over Clint’s surprised blinking until Clint himself burst out laughing. “Sorry,” Bruce added, but his wry smile proved how *not* sorry he was.

Clint grinned. “This is why we need you at our dinners. Otherwise, it’s just these two—” Clint gestured between Phil and Natasha with his toothpick. “—jabbering while I seriously consider taking out my hearing aids.”

“You talk less when you do, which is nice,” Natasha said with a shrug, and when Clint elbowed her, she broke into a warm, genuine smile.

The buffet spread, once placed in the warmers, was just as ridiculous as Phil anticipated: there were two kinds of scrambled eggs, plus bacon, sausage, smoked sausage, ham, pancakes, waffles, biscuits with country gravy, grits, oatmeal, and a truly shameful amount of fruit. “I promise, the leftovers are going directly to the local soup kitchen,” Pepper said, holding up her hands in defense.

Tony stopped piling meat onto his plate to stare at her. “You know I intend to eat three quarters of this myself, don’t you?”

“And I intend to be somewhere else while you complain you’re dying,” she replied, and patted him on the shoulder.

Once everyone was seated—an endeavor that took a lot longer than necessary thanks to the fact that both Bucky and Rhodes’s nameplates said *James* and *Steve*, in what Phil assumed was still a sex-hazy stupor, had asked why Tony split up two of the couples—Tony stood at the head of the table with a glass of iced tea and knocked his knife against it a few times.

“He knows this isn’t a wedding, right?” Clint muttered.

Phil patted his thigh under the table. “I think he’s trying to be mature and welcoming,” he murmured back.

“Just for that crack, Coulson, I will be having surprise sex in the supply closet at least three times next week,” Tony interrupted. Everyone laughed while, very subtly, Pepper shook her head and

mouthed *no, he won't*. Phil bit back a grin. "Anyway, the man who clearly and repeatedly doesn't deserve Barton is right in that I am trying to be kind of welcoming," he continued. "I may, in recent months, have been reminded by no fewer than four people at this table that part of being, you know, a friend is being supportive of your friend's stuff. Professional stuff, personal stuff, relationship stuff—" He waved a hand. "And maybe I have not always qualified as being supportive of all that."

At the other end of the table from Phil and Clint, Bucky frowned. "Did you have a lobotomy between Friday and today?" he asked.

Tony rolled his eyes. "You let a guy have a little no-holds barred sex with somebody who looks like Rogers—"

"It's been more than a little," Bucky retorted while the tips of Steve's ears turned bright red.

"Once again, things I don't need to know about your boyfriend," Natasha complained, shaking her head.

Across the table from her, Rhodes started to open his mouth, but Carol cut him off by saying, "Yes, they are always like this."

"Can we focus for just *two* seconds before my yearly quota of maturity flies out the window, please?" Tony cut them all off. Next to Phil, Clint snickered audibly, and Tony shot him an annoyed look. "My point is just that I want to be supportive of all your stuff, as individuals and as people in relationships not nearly as amazing as mine—"

"Not a contest, Tony," Pepper said under her breath, but she smiled anyway.

"—and that is why we're having our first annual brunch, right here and right now. And maybe next year, Rogers and Barnes will show up on time and with their flies closed."

Steve's face flared even redder, but everyone else—mostly led by Pepper—raised their glasses in response to Tony's strange, almost incoherent toast. When he finally sat down to eat, Clint leaned all the way into Phil's personal space until his lips almost brushed Phil's ear. "I think we do it in the closet four times next week, just to mess with him," he murmured.

Phil smiled very slowly. "If I leave you with any energy after brunch today," he replied, and squeezed Clint's thigh when Clint grinned.

Home

Jasper looked up when the box of cookies hit his desk early Monday morning. Not just any cookies, oh no. These were a dozen of the finest and sweetest the hole-in-the-wall bakery down the street—his personal favorite—had to offer. Already his tiny office smelled like sugary heaven, but he kept his face straight as he addressed the gift-giver. “Fury’s handling your next observation. Go suck up to him.”

Carol crossed her arms under her chest. “They’re apology cookies. Sorry I was a bitch last week.”

Jasper leaned back in his chair and adopted his official assistant principal tone of voice. “And what exactly are you sorry about?”

“You can’t be serious.” Jasper continued to stare up at her patiently until she huffed. “I’m sorry I thought you would put your love life ahead of your work, and I apologize for slandering your taste in women for dating the spawns’ mother.”

“Thank you,” he answered before nudging the box back in her direction. “Have a cookie.”

“They’re for you,” Carol replied.

“And I’m being a kind co-worker and sharing,” he said before nudging the box once more. She sighed but opened the lid anyway. “Not that one,” he warned as she reached for the one with the lemon frosting. “Take the mint one, that’s my least favorite.”

Carol sunk into one of the chairs across from his desk as she took her first bite. Jasper grabbed the pumpkin spice cookie and began to eat with her. “You know why I go on rampages about boys like that, right?” she asked around a mouthful of sweetness.

“Military training?”

“No,” she said with a small smile. “I had a cousin growing up who lived down the street. Sweetest kid you’ll ever meet, but that’s a pretty common trait in kids with Down’s syndrome.” She paused to suck crumbs off her fingertips before continuing. “I was a grade ahead of him in school. And man, did the kids give him shit. Not all of them—some weren’t complete Neanderthals—but there were a few who tried to be badass. And according to their mindset, that meant picking on the weakest, most innocent kid in the school.”

“And how often did you get sent to the office for beating the shit out of those kids?”

A sly smile crossed her face. “I always managed to pin the blame on my older brothers. At least until they moved on to the next school. It was their punishment for being too big of wusses to stand up for Devon themselves.”

Jasper chuckled. “Is there any point in your life when you weren’t a terrifying badass?”

“Nope.”

They sat for a moment in silence until Jasper admitted, “Seventeen.”

“Hmm?” Carol asked with a creased brow.

“In the six years I’ve had this job, there have been seventeen women I’ve seen. More than a date or

two, I mean,” Jasper explained. “At first they think it’s the sexiest thing ever—a man who loves working with all these little kids. My excellent cooking also helps in the sexy department.” He paused to smirk at Carol’s eye roll. “But after a few months they realize I work all the damn time, and it’s rarely rainbows and unicorns around here. And they don’t even know about half the shit that goes down in the school, because I don’t trust ‘em enough to talk about those things at that point.”

Jasper paused to snag another cookie, the lemon one, before continuing. “They leave when they realize the illusion is just that. And it’s fine, because I love my job and I love these kids, and no woman is going to distract me from that. Unless, of course, she has the body of Heidi Klum and the culinary talents of the Barefoot Contessa.”

“And how does Mama Hill stack up to that comparison?”

Jasper snorted. “She can’t even boil water without something going wrong, but,” he added quietly, “it’s nice to be around someone who knows the job.”

“Even if her kids are shits?”

He glared at Carol. “Not entirely her fault, for the millionth time.” Carol shrugged him off, so he decided to get in a little jab of his own. “You sure you’re not busting my balls over all of this because you’re terrified of your own relationship?”

“The hell?”

“Please, Danvers. When was the last time you stuck with a guy for more than a week?”

Carol threw her hands up in frustration. “Why is everyone riding me about this?”

“I don’t know about anyone else, but my office is next to Pepper’s,” he answered. “Do you know how often I can hear Stark burst in there and declare that he’s made up so new variable for the program he’s writing to estimate when you and his friend’ll get married? Because it happens at least twice a week.”

“I’ll rip his balls off,” Carol vowed darkly.

“Not on school property,” Jasper warned. “I don’t want to deal with that paperwork, and you know Fury won’t either. But if it’s off school property, please sell tickets because you know you could make a fortune.”

“It’s cute,” Steve said carefully, and Bucky rolled his eyes. “What? It is. It’s, I don’t know, homey.”

“It’s a shoebox,” Bucky argued.

“A homey shoebox,” Steve retorted, and bit into his free open house cookie.

Bucky sighed and crossed the tiny living room of the equally-tiny house. The plan’d just been to drive around a couple neighborhoods near the school—“You can get a feel for the market,” Steve’d said, and Bucky’d tried not to wriggle in his seat like one of his students, in need of a bathroom break—but here they were: standing on an area rug in a tiny room, eating free cookies while the realtor showed two more couples around. It was a two-bedroom, one-bath house that’d been around for ages, with built-in bookshelves and nice hardwood floors, but—

“You could touch the walls,” Bucky said. Steve stopped perusing the cookies, and Bucky gestured to where he was standing in the middle of the room. “Come stand by me. I bet if you opened your arms, you could touch the walls on either side.”

Steve shook his head. “Because your apartment’s so roomy.”

“I don’t want a house where I’m afraid my boyfriend’s shoulders might be wider than the hallway,” Bucky returned, and Steve bit down on a laugh as the realtor returned.

“Yeah, okay,” Steve muttered, mostly because the longer Bucky shot him that look—grinning, incorrigible, with raised eyebrows and sparkling eyes—the hotter his face got.

His mother, her lips tightly pursed to hide her own smile, reached over and patted Bucky on the arm. “We ordered a pizza, if you want to stay,” she suggested. “I’m sure it doesn’t compare to your lasagna—”

“Can I have that in writing, sent to my Ma and triple underlined?” Bucky asked.

“—but since you were in the neighborhood, you might as well stick around.”

Bucky tossed Steve a momentary sideways glance, and Steve tried his best to ignore the burst of warmth in his belly when he nodded. Bucky grinned before turning back to his mom. “Sure, that’d be great,” he said, and immediately started toting off his shoes.

“Good!” Steve’s mom chirped. She squeezed his arm before finally stepping out of the foyer. “I’m going to get actual plates, then. The last thing you need is to see Steve inhaling pizza out of the box like he’s still fifteen.”

“Mom,” Steve warned her, but he couldn’t help his own stupid grin. His mom stopped to squeeze him on the arm, too, before she disappeared into the kitchen. He only realized after she’d gone that she’d stolen the wine out of Bucky’s grip, leaving him empty handed.

Steve fixed that by stepping into his personal space and letting Bucky slide arms along his waist. He waited until he heard the banging of kitchen cabinets to lean down and kiss him—hey, grown man or not, his mom was still his *mom*. When they pulled away, he grinned at Bucky. “Just in the neighborhood?”

Bucky shrugged. “I was driving by some more houses.”

“I think you’ve stalked every house in this neighborhood twice.”

“Hey, that’s not fair to the other neighborhoods I’m stalking. Makes me sound like less of an equal-opportunity creep.” Steve laughed, shaking his head. “Your mom seems pretty great, you know.”

He nodded. “She is,” he admitted. “She probably deserves twice as many mom-of-the-year mugs as I bought her when I was a kid—even if she has been needling me about meeting you since November.”

“November?” Bucky demanded, and Steve felt the warmth sneak back onto his cheeks. “I clearly underestimated your staying power, if you’ve been fending her off that long.”

Steve smirked. “And you’d know all about my staying power, wouldn’t you?”

“The way I’m about to charm your mom, I plan on seeing a *lot* of that staying power tonight,” Bucky replied, and Steve laughed before they headed in to help his mother set the table.

“You need a yard?” Steve asked, his hands on hips. He stood on the brick patio—kind of classy, actually, the bricks arranged in cool geometric patterns—and watched Bucky survey the tiny patch of grass behind the house. Bucky’s realtor had kept hovering, clucking about the new countertops and the recently-remodeled master bathroom, until they stepped outside.

Bucky shrugged. “A yard might be nice,” he said. Steve ducked his head to hide a grin. “What? Maybe I like a big yard.”

“What would you even do with a yard?”

“I don’t know. Get a dog, maybe.” Steve raised his eyebrows. “I could get a dog.”

“You complained when Birdie smeared drool on your pants.”

“Because she has no manners.” Steve’s grin grew, and Bucky elbowed him. “You’d love my fictional dog.”

Steve snorted. “Knowing my luck, your fictional dog would love me better, and then where would we be?”

“Then you’d have a dog for your big back yard,” Bucky replied—and purposely ignored Steve’s funny little glance as he stepped back inside the house.

“I’m just saying, it’s not a good threat when it involves the words *your ass*, because then I get distracted!” Clint yelled through to the kitchen, and Bruce laughed.

As many times as he’d been to Phil and Clint’s house—football parties, March Madness parties, a surprise birthday party for Tony that Tony’d known about weeks ahead of time—it’d felt different pulling up with Natasha next to him in the car. In a way, it’d reminded him of senior prom, his hands sweating and fidgety as he met his date’s parents.

After all, Phil and Clint were Natasha’s work family as much as Tony was Bruce’s, and this felt like the second phase to their coming out party.

At least, until Clint’d yelled at them to come in and they’d been greeted by Phil and Clint bickering about some work-related book debacle while Birdie whined for scraps.

Clint dropped onto the couch next to Bruce and offered a mug of coffee. He could hear Natasha and Phil still talking about a school library convention in the kitchen, their words half-covered by the rattling of dishes in the dishwasher. Clint caught him eavesdropping and sighed. “They do that,” he said, shaking his head. “I think it’s left over to back when Phil was married to his work instead of a hot younger man—”

“I heard that,” Phil called from the kitchen.

“—and it usually takes a conversation about sex to derail him all over again.” Bruce raised his eyebrows, and Clint waved a hand. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to pry. I figured out years ago that Nat’s probably like a tiger and you’re lucky to come out with your hair intact.”

“And *I* heard *that*,” Natasha commented, and walked out of the kitchen for the express purpose of

swatting Clint over the head with a dish towel.

Clint grabbed for the towel, nearly falling over the back of the couch, and Birdie bounded out of the kitchen to bark at both of them. She chased the towel back into the kitchen, hopping in an attempt to catch it. Bruce laughed. "Are you sure you're not secretly siblings?" he asked.

"There's no way a man with as many scarves as Clint has Russian blood," Natasha called back through.

"Maybe we use them the same way we use Phil's ties!" Clint shouted back, grinning. He flopped back against the couch properly. "She acts like she's cold-blooded, but I've seen her run out to her car after school and start warming it up before she leaves."

"You mean defrosting the windows?" Bruce asked.

"Tomato, tomato," Clint replied, pronouncing both words the same. Bruce chuckled at him, sipping his coffee, and Clint nudged his leg with a sock-covered foot. "I'm glad you manned up," he said after a minute. "I know we come across as being worse than Stark—"

"Nobody is worse than Stark," Phil reminded them both from the kitchen.

"—but it's nice to see you outside of school or the usual group outings." He paused, looking thoughtful. "And to see you with Natasha."

He said the last part more quietly, almost as though he wanted to hide it from the two people still in the kitchen, and Bruce pursed his lips. He listened to Phil and Natasha's trailing voices before he said, "I'm sorry if our secretiveness hurt you, somehow. Looking back, we maybe should have—"

"Don't do that," Clint interrupted, shaking his head. "We're not Tony. We don't keep some secret book of hurt feelings in the glove compartment and check off times people piss us off. It's just good you're here. That's it."

"And he keeps his secret book in the bedside table," Phil said. Clint scooted down on the couch to make room for his husband, and they settled in together, their arms bumping comfortably until Clint fake-yawned and slung his arm over the back of the couch. Phil rolled his eyes. "He's not very good at pep talks, if that's what he's trying to do."

"I'm great at pep talks."

"If you're ten and having a hard time with your spelling words," Natasha countered. She settled into one of the other chairs in the room.

Clint snorted. "It's called the 'vocabulary workshop' this year."

"That doesn't really prove me wrong."

"It shows what you know about my bad spellers," Clint retorted, and against his better judgment, Bruce laughed. He tried to hide it in his coffee, but Clint's face burst out in a grin anyway. "Pep talk aside, Bruce can stick around at our dinners because he thinks I'm funny."

"He just doesn't know you well enough," Phil replied.

"And looks aren't everything," Natasha added.

Bruce laughed again when Clint flipped them both off.

He and Natasha stayed until the four of them had drained an entire pot of coffee—"I know how you can wear me out," Clint said to Phil as they walked out the door, Phil's responding smirk full of promise—and let themselves out into the cool late-winter night. For one fluttering moment, Bruce considered reaching for Natasha's hand, but then Natasha touched his arm and stopped him on Clint and Phil's front walk.

When he started to ask what was wrong, she leaned up and kissed him. It was slow and sweet, a kiss flavored by coffee and the evening chill, and Bruce only realized he'd reached for her when he found his hands spread over her sides. He smiled as she pulled away, feeling all at once grateful and sheepish. "What was that for?" he asked.

"Just a thank you," Natasha replied, and she lingered a few seconds longer in his grip before walking to the car.

"There's a house on North Avenue—"

"The kitchen's tiny." Steve glanced up from his laptop, and Bucky shrugged. "I checked out that listing already," he said, his feet nudging Steve's leg. They were supposed to be spending a lazy evening watching TV, but then Steve'd dragged out the computer and started looking at houses on Zillow. For Bucky, of course, and not that Bucky was reading things into that. He poked Steve in the side with his toe, and Steve swiped at him. "You're not my realtor, you know."

"At the rate your realtor's going, you'll be living in an extended-stay motel for the next two school years." Bucky rolled his eyes, and Steve clicked around some more. "Okay, they're a little further away, but there are a couple houses in that newer subdivision up north of here that—"

Bucky waved a hand and flipped channels on the TV. "Too far of a commute."

Steve frowned. "You remember how long your commute is now, right?"

"Yeah, and if I'm emptying my savings to put a down payment on house, it's going to be closer to work than that."

"Okay, then what about the one on Price Road? Big kitchen, four bedrooms—"

"What am I going to do with *four* bedrooms, put in bunk beds for my sisters to visit?" Steve rolled his eyes, and Bucky toed him again. "Why are you working so hard to find me a house?" he pried. "I have a realtor, plus you, Natasha, and at least one sister to serve as my final approval team. I'm not going to end up in a dump."

Steve pressed his lips together, silently staring at the computer screen. Finally, he shrugged. "I want you to like where you live," he said, his voice oddly quiet.

Bucky swallowed around the weird feeling in the back of his throat. "You worry too much," he returned, and Steve kind of smiled at him.

It'd been weeks since Bucky went running with Nat. He'd recently found a better, sexier way of killing time and burning calories, but Steve had a dentist appointment followed by an annual cancer-survivors-only type of dinner thing. He'd looked ridiculously adorable as he apologized for not being able to bring Bucky with him. And Bucky may have played on that guilt to do some of that aforementioned burning of calories.

Nat, unsurprisingly, had heard that he was going to be on his own for the evening and demanded a

post-school run. Bucky was glad for the time to catch up since both of them had been pretty preoccupied with significant others, but he was not looking forward to running with Natasha. He'd suffered a groin injury doing so in college, and ever since, just the thought of going on a brief jog with her caused phantom pain in some very important places.

Bucky was also happy to take a break from all the house hunting. He'd told Fury two weeks before that he'd accept the fourth grade position and be the team leader. During their celebratory dinner, Bucky'd mentioned to his boyfriend that he was going to start packing things up and looking for a new place closer to school because his current commute was the worst and he was tired of dealing with it. Steve had then taken it upon himself to drive the long way back to his house, driving through neighborhoods to "start getting a feel about things."

Bucky knew he was trying to be sweet and supportive, but the constant meetings with the realtor, comparing floorplans, and counting the dollars in his savings account was starting to become exhausting. He needed this run, and he needed to not think about houses and what qualified as "feeling like home" for an hour.

He'd thought if he went out with Nat he'd be safe from that. He was wrong.

She'd started in half a mile ago, and even though he tried to change the subject, it seemed to have only egged her on. For the last quarter mile, he'd tried to play off his indecisiveness about finding a new place to live as having a lot on his mind at the moment. He stood jogging in place begging the light to change so there could be forward movement and maybe, just maybe, they could leave the topic behind them.

Natasha looked up from where she'd bent over, catching her breath. "You're listening to yourself, right?"

He gave her an incredulous look once he wiped sweat from his face with his hoodie sleeve. "What are you talking about?"

"You. Being dumb and clueless. Per usual." She ignored his middle finger. "You might as well admit that you and Steve are moving at the ridiculous relationship rate as Clint and Phil."

"Not all of us can be bitter old hags our whole lives."

She flipped him off in return before bolting into the crosswalk. "I'm getting laid on the regular, thank you very much," she informed him over her shoulder.

He faked a shudder as he caught up to her. "Please don't give me details on that."

"The feeling's mutual about you and yours. But seriously, why do you think it is that you haven't found a place yet?"

Bucky shrugged. "They just don't feel right. Or maybe they're too small, or have mold, or I don't want to spend a lot of money on a house and then pay even more to fix it up the way I want."

"Or maybe you're using your typical pickiness as an excuse for the obvious."

"That's the kindest nickname you've had for my OCD-tendencies in I don't know how long."

Natasha stopped on the sidewalk, forcing him to do the same. "Do you love him?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Of course I do. He's the best thing to happen to me since you, probably."

“I’m going to ignore the last word of that sentence,” she joked with a smirk, but her face quickly turned serious once more. “How much do you want to be with him?”

Bucky swallowed around a whole mess of things: the urge to run as far and fast from his old friend as possible, the desire to spew words he was terrified to admit, the fear of all of this becoming so real so fast. “What do you mean?” He knew it sounded like the line of bullshit that it was, and he really should have been smarter than to try and play off such a weak defense against someone like Natasha, but he couldn’t help it. He didn’t want to think about those things, let alone admit them, because life had never been that easy for him and he highly doubted it had changed its tune now.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, fine. But know that I think it’s dumb for you to ignore what you want.”

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest. “Really? This coming from she who avoided Banner like the plague once feelings became involved?”

“Yes, from me.” She took two steps closer and invaded his personal space; he fought the urge not to move backwards. “And if I wanted to spend every waking hour with Bruce—see him all the time at school, come home with him, always be at his side—I’d do it. But I’m not there yet, I’m pretty sure he isn’t either, and we don’t know if we’ll ever get there. But if and when that happens for the two of us, I hope I don’t waste my time like you.”

He swallowed again and looked at his shoes. “Steve and I aren’t there yet. I mean, yeah, I just met his mom and we’ve said ‘I love you’ and all that, but we’re not there yet.”

“Whatever you say, dumbass.”

“I just don’t get a good feeling about this one,” Bucky said.

His sister Rebecca—in town to do some sort of nebulous literature research that Bucky suspected was code for *quality brother annoying*—raised both her eyebrows at him. “Really,” she intoned.

He frowned at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, other than the fact that your realtor keeps making worried sounds about your boyfriend not being here *and* that this is the third house you’ve stuck your nose up at.” She crossed her arms under her chest and leveled him a look. “Shouldn’t you just call Steve?”

“Steve’s not the one buying a house,” Bucky reminded her.

“No, but he’s clearly your voice of house-buying reason or something.” She leaned against the kitchen island—a really big kitchen island, and the stove was brand new with *six* burners, proof Steve could never see this house—and leveled him a long look. “And this house is perfect.”

Bucky shrugged. “It doesn’t feel like home,” he replied.

“Huh, wonder why,” Rebecca retorted, and trotted out of the room as Bucky’s realtor reappeared.

The life of a substitute teacher was not a glamorous one. Ninety percent of the time, you woke up in the morning not knowing where you were going to spend your day, or even if you’d get work at all. You could spend Tuesday teaching a calculus class and the next day hanging out with preschoolers. And no matter what the age you were assigned for the day, the kids knew that strangers in the classroom were there to test boundaries.

But Wade loved it. His initial job choice—graphic design—hadn't panned out. The market was overcrowded, and apparently there weren't too many people who enjoyed his style. The fools. He'd started subbing when he needed to pay rent and there wasn't anyone desiring of his mad Photoshop skills. He fell in love instantly.

Sure, there were days when he'd only been at work for thirty minutes before he started planning out how he was going to drink a margarita the size of his head when he got home, but those days didn't happen too often. And his reputation of being good with the kids, and probably the fact that he didn't have an oxygen tank trailing behind him like some of the other geezer subs, made it so he worked most days. Which was good, because it allowed him to make money at a job relating to his (hopefully successful) future career. While he subbed during the day, he took education classes at night to earn a degree in art education. He could never wear cardigans like one Steve Rogers, but Wade was pretty sure he could make a decent art teacher.

Some schools were better than others, and he had his favorite group of kids at each one, but overall the best one was the elementary school twenty minutes down the road. There was a list of reasons why that was true: the kids were awesome, the staff actually talked to him and acknowledged his existence, and if he shamelessly flirted with the lunch ladies, they gave him extra chicken nuggets and fries at no charge. But at the top of the list, the numero uno spot, was one Darcy Lewis.

Darcy was the definition of Wade's dream girl: gorgeous, nerdy, fantastic rack, and wicked sense of humor. The only problem was Wade never mastered the art of talking to the ladies. Thus, he'd resigned himself to a life where Darcy would forever be up on a pedestal and never between his Batman sheets.

His Batman sheets were awesome, thank you very much.

Normally he was just fine with cracking a few jokes and taking in a whiff of her coffee-scented hair, but even a month after Valentine's Day was finally over and done with, he was still feeling pretty alone. So he figured, why not? Today could totally be the day he finally manned up and did something. Maybe.

He fumbled over words when he greeted her in the morning to pick up his assignment and the classroom folder containing sub plans, directions for emergencies, and a student roster to send to the office for attendance purposes. Thankfully, Darcy was too tied up in answering phone calls and waving at kids in the hallway to notice.

Wade spent his day with Jessica Drew's second graders; their teacher apparently ate something questionable the night before and was now paying for it. Or at least, that was the report from Danvers, who undoubtedly had the best and most accurate gossip. Wade was pretty sure Romanoff could give the SpEd teacher a run for her money, but if Darcy was intimidating to talk to, then forgot about the Russian Czarina who ruled the gym with an iron fist.

He was half-tempted to sneak out on to the playground for recess with his students of the day. Wade knew Henry Odinson would be out there, and Wade also knew who babysat for the Odinsons all the time. He was pretty sure he could bribe the kid into some information with a sucker or something, but again—Russian Czarina. He did not want Romanoff catching him giving candy to a not quite baby in return for some juicy deets about his juicy babysitter.

The end of the day marked now or never time. Wade walked his class to the bus and made sure Drew's room was as neat as he found it, which was difficult since it looked like the teacher was one of those organized-mess types.

He considered stopping off in the bathroom for a little pep talk but decided against it. Mostly

because he didn't have a key for the staff-only bathroom, and the mirrors in the restrooms for the students only came up to his chest. He gave a see you later nod to Rogers on the way to the office and nearly avoided body-checking Banner as he came around the corner. Wade waved off the other man's apology and felt his nerves go through the roof.

It's just talking to another person, Wade reminded himself. A really funny, hot, coffee-scented, hot person.

As he entered the office, he heard Darcy mutter a string of curses as she looked at her phone. "Everything okay?" he asked as he handed her back the sub folder.

"My mom's the worst," she replied. "How was your day?"

"Awesome as always," he answered with a smile. "Ummm, listen, you wouldn't be interested in seeing a movie or something with me on Friday, would you? That new zombie flick is coming out, and I know you love your undead."

"No thanks," she quickly answered. Her gaze was halfway back to the paperwork in front of her when her eyes snapped back up to meet his. "Did I just turn you down?"

"I'd really like to say no, but yeah. Kinda."

"Why would I do that?" she asked. "I mean, most days I see you're going to be here, I really hope you forget to put on a shirt when you show up for work. Why would I shoot you down?"

Wade fumbled for an answer, but nothing came to mind. Instead, he slinked out of the office while she was lost in thought with as much dignity as a rejected man like him could muster.

"This house is pretty great," Steve said as they circled back into the kitchen from the official tour. "I mean, it's got pretty much everything you've been looking for: a big kitchen, a decent yard, an extra bedroom for your sister's 'spinster years'—" He used finger quotes, and Bucky rolled his eyes. "Rebecca was right when she said it was perfect."

"Yeah," Bucky admitted. He could practically feel his realtor's maniacal grin, but smiling felt harder than usual. He forced one anyway, shoving his hands in his pockets. "The price is kind of low, though, which is—"

"Lucky for you?" Steve offered, and Bucky snorted at him a little. He shrugged as Steve stepped into his personal space. "Tony even checked the state's haunted house registry and said you're in the clear," he pressed, one of his hands finding Bucky's side.

"Please tell me that's not a real thing."

"I don't know if it's a real thing, but Tony swears by it." Bucky finally gave in and laughed a little at Steve's delight. Steve smiled. "Bucky, it's the right house."

"Yeah, I know," Bucky said, and grinned around the sinking feeling in his stomach.

He convinced his realtor that he needed a couple nights to sleep on it, then stood in the front yard with Steve as she locked up and drove away. The street lights in the neighborhood cast long shadows on the sidewalk; a couple houses down, one of Bucky's potential new neighbors was taking out his trash. Bucky stared at him long enough that he missed Steve watching him until he said, "Bucky."

Bucky sucked in a long breath before he glanced over, forcing himself to smile at Steve's half-shadowed face. "If you're trying to sell me on the house being perfect, I already subscribe to the newsletter. You should probably talk to my sister, try a united front about it, because—"

"No, Bucky, I don't—"

Steve trailed off, his face softening, and Bucky shook his head. "Sorry, that was bitchy," he said immediately. The corner of Steve's mouth nudged into a smile, and Bucky snorted. "It's not you or the house, it's just me. I guess I don't know what I want, or I'm looking for too many things all at once, because even when the house is technically perfect, I—"

"Move in with me," Steve blurted, and the rest of the sentence died on Bucky's lips. When he twisted to look up at Steve again, he got to watch a red flush rush across his face. Steve ducked his head. "I just mean, if you don't know what you're looking for in a house, well, I have a house. And the kitchen's probably a little small, but overall, it might be okay." He stole a glance at Bucky, and the helpless hope in his eyes nearly bowled Bucky over. "If you want to."

"You're an idiot if you think I don't want to," Bucky responded. A gorgeous, relieved smile overtook Steve's face. "I also want to kiss you in the front yard of the house I'm not buying."

Steve grinned. "Hey, another thing we both want," he said, and Bucky, laughing, made good on his threat.

March Madness

Chapter Summary

Basketball isn't the only source of madness for this month of March.

There were certainly advantages to moving in with one's boyfriend: shared bed, shared shower, shared couch. Bucky was thrilled to spend every night in Steve's bed (even though he totally hogged the covers and the mattress was as hard as a rock) and to cook for him (even if Steve's kitchen was tiny and totally disorganized), the shininess was starting to tarnish just a teeny, tiny bit.

The Saturday after they decided they'd move in together, Nat helped Bucky pack up some of his things at his apartment. "I'm not cleaning this place," she announced as she zipped up a suitcase full of shirts and sweaters.

"I didn't volunteer you for the job," he responded.

"I'm just saying I was the one who did most of the cleaning when you and Alex lived together—"

"You were there enough to basically live with us, so I don't know why all these years later you still treat it as something so unfair."

"—and I'm not reliving those days."

Bucky paused in his folding of jeans to stare her down. "You call me OCD all the time, and I was in the Army. How messy do you really think I am?"

"I'm just saying that I'm walking at the first sign of a condom wrapper. I have to look Steve in the eye during department meetings, bus duty, and recess. There are some things I never need to know."

"What?" Bucky asked with a smirk. "Like length or girth? How he moans? The face he makes when he comes?" He laughed as a pillow launched at his face.

When the two of them finished unloading some of Bucky's belongings at Steve's, Natasha patted Steve on the arm on her way out the door. "He's your problem now."

There wasn't much of Bucky's stuff in Steve's house at the moment, just necessities and enough laundry to last a couple of weeks. The plan was for the two of them to go through both Steve's house and Bucky's apartment to see what all would be kept and what was garage sale material. Bucky felt guilty for making Steve get rid of stuff and had mostly volunteered to ditch his own belongings, even if it made life more difficult.

Steve's house was small—a bungalow, really. Each room was a different color with countless refurbished and repurposed items all over. Nothing matched, but it all worked; his home could seriously be a show on HGTV. And with Steve's looks, it would probably be pretty popular.

But it still felt like Steve's home.

Bucky'd never lived with a guy before, not including military or college life. He'd never "shacked up" with someone, as several of his sisters had called it. And he realized that the little house wouldn't instantly become something that reflected both of its occupants. He and Steve had only been together for a few months, anyway—and, yeah, they were totally moving along at the Barton-Coulson pace, which Bucky tried not to think too much about—so it really wasn't expected that their lives would have a collection of things that belonged to them as a couple.

"You know you can move things," Steve said as Bucky cooked. It'd been a week and a half after Bucky'd moved in, and he was currently trying to get supper—ravioli made from scratch—on the table.

"What?" Bucky asked as he looked over his shoulder at him.

Steve barely smiled as he sat at the tiny table they ate at. His face was still looking at the laptop where he was researching the list of stats for different teams that Bucky had asked for to help them fill out brackets. "My stuff—you can move it."

"It's fine," Bucky muttered.

"That's the third time in ten minutes you've sworn under your breath. It's obviously not fine." He stood and came to stand behind Bucky, hands lightly resting on his hips. Bucky felt himself start to calm at the contact. "You can move my stuff anywhere you want because it's not just my stuff anymore. It's yours, too."

Bucky turned in Steve's grasp and shot him a sheepish look. "Can the place I move your cookware be the firepit in Stark's backyard?" He felt guilty at the slightly betrayed look that crossed Steve's face.

"My mom gave me those when I was in college," Steve said.

"My niece has better pots and pans. She's seven and her kitchen is made of plastic."

"Fine," Steve surrendered. "If it means my dinners will be more evenly cooked if we use your stuff instead of mine, then I guess I'll live."

"You survived for years eating Hungry Man frozen dinners, please don't act like the amazingness I'm able to pull off with your shitty kitchenware is such a burden for you to eat."

"Let me ask you a totally hypothetical question," Darcy blurted, and Natasha glanced away from the man who was trimming her cuticles.

Natasha knew that people raised their eyes at her friendship with Darcy—bubbly, outgoing, possibly insane Darcy—and wondered why she stopped in the office to talk about new fingernail-painting techniques or Darcy's latest Pinterest project. And honestly, some days, Natasha couldn't come up with an answer for why. But Darcy liked strong coffee (with chocolate in it), offbeat movies (with attractive men in them), fashion (with a critical eye to traditional notions of beauty), and the students. Even if the first three points hadn't convinced Natasha to give Darcy a little of her time, the last one won her over.

Plus, Darcy subscribed to some mailing list that constantly sent her buy-one, get-one coupons for the local nail salon, and Jane Foster hated strangers poking at her nails.

Darcy was frowning at the evening news on the TV in the corner of the salon instead of looking at Natasha. "A hypothetical question," she repeated.

“Yeah. Totally hypothetical, not based in reality, just to, I don’t know, bounce a thought off somebody else.” She shrugged. “I started to ask Barton, but he was all—”

She waved her free hand, and Natasha smirked. “He was giving advice like the old married man that he is?”

“Does he do that to you, too?” Darcy asked, whipping her head around. When Natasha nodded, trying not to laugh, she slouched in her chair. “That makes me feel better. I assumed he was trying to big brother me, and I’ve had enough of that for a lifetime, lately.”

“From Clint?”

“No, from Thor.” Natasha raised an eyebrow, but Darcy ignored it to look back at the TV. “He says I’ve been ‘less effervescent’ than usual. Which sounds like a way you describe a fancy toothpaste, not a person.”

“At least Clint doesn’t use words that big,” Natasha offered.

Darcy laughed, but her smile faded quickly. “No kidding,” she said. She stared at the TV for a few more seconds before shaking her head. “So, hypothetical question: you meet someone. A guy, a girl, somebody in between, whatever you’re into. Or at least, whatever you’re usually into, and they’re maybe into you, and it—” She frowns at herself. “Can I start that over? It kind of got away from me.”

Natasha shrugged as the stylist reached for her other hand. “I’m here to listen,” she said as Darcy glanced over. “Judgment-free nail zone, remember? I think you said that the second time we came.”

“Because I was trying to weasel your sex life out of you. Look how that turned out.”

She grinned. “Turned out pretty well for me.”

Darcy shuddered. “As glad as I am that you get to work all that—” She gestured generally to Natasha’s torso, and Natasha bit back a laugh. “—with somebody who digs it, thinking of Bruce in bed is kind of like thinking about your hot uncle, you know? Like, you can squint and tell he’s cute, but if you have to think about him with his pants off—”

Natasha raised both her eyebrows, smirking, and Darcy’s face twisted into a grimace. This time, Natasha actually laughed. “Yeah, we’re not talking about the Bruce part of your sex life,” she decided. “That’s like thinking about the Phil part of Clint’s sex life, and I *like* Phil.”

“Just not in that way?” Natasha asked.

“Depends on if we’re playing hot-for-teacher or something,” Darcy admitted, and Natasha chuckled. The stylist sent her a sharp look until she held still. Darcy, meanwhile, fell quiet again. “Have you ever thought you knew what you wanted until you could have it?”

Natasha glanced over, frowning, and watched as Darcy worried her lower lip between her teeth. She’d known Darcy long enough to know that Darcy never talked about emotions beyond *my mother is driving me crazy and I might kill her*—and that Darcy rarely struggled for words. She wore enough on her sleeve that most people forgot the booming announcements and the ridiculous scarves (and fingernails, and coffee drinks) hid a real person underneath.

Sometimes, Natasha forgot, too.

She watched Darcy for a few more beats before she answered, “I’ve refused to let myself want something until I’ve lost it.” Darcy snapped her head over, and Natasha smiled briefly. “I don’t always make things easy on myself. I convince myself it’s easier to not want than to want and maybe hurt. I think most the staff’s guilty of that.”

Darcy snorted. “Uh, I watched the Barnes-Rogers eye sex thing for months, so yeah, no kidding. But, I just—” She released a long, slow breath. “I spent all this time and energy on, I don’t know, let’s call him—*it*, let’s call *it* Letter A. And Letter A was great, and fun, and I kept waiting for when Letter A would get its act together and maybe finally ask me for a coffee, because I laid it on *thick* but Letter A was freaking clueless.”

“To be fair, Letter A once wore his polo shirt inside out while he was subbing,” Natasha pointed out.

“I *still* don’t know how he did that,” Darcy complained, shaking her head. Natasha smiled. “But, okay, so, that all was going on. And I wanted it—him, whatever. I wanted Wade to finally just get it together and ask me out and we could skip off into the sunset or whatever happy people do.” When Natasha frowned, Darcy rolled her eyes. “I live next door to the cutest couple ever. They’ve ruined me for normal relationships.”

“Remind me to tell you about James’s delight at being a live-in boyfriend,” Natasha returned.

Darcy tilted her head at her. “Are they going to get married as fast as Clint and Phil? Because Tony wants to start a betting pool.”

“Don’t tell Stark, but I think they’ll be faster.” Darcy let out a low whistle, and Natasha snorted a tiny laugh. “It really is that bad.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Tell me about it.”

Darcy laughed at that, just one surprised bark, and then leaned back in her seat. Unlike Natasha, Darcy’d picked out a bright purple for her nails, complete with sparkling bits. She watched the stylist paint them for a few more seconds before she said, “He asked me out, and I told him no. After all that time. And the worst part is, I think I *meant* no.”

“Do you know why you meant no?” Natasha asked.

“No.”

“Darcy—”

“Okay, maybe.” She shook her head. “Maybe I do and I’m not ready to say, I don’t know. But I spent all this time so sure I knew what I wanted, and it’s really weird to *not* know anymore.”

Natasha felt herself smile slightly. “I know what you mean. But I also know that sometimes, it’s less that you don’t know what you want and more that you’re *scared* to want it.” She shrugged. “Hypothetically.”

“Totally hypothetically,” Darcy replied, but she smiled, too.

Tony walked into the main office, threw his arms wide open, and loudly sang, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

Darcy glared at him while she ended a phone call. When she hung up, she handed him her five March Madness tournament brackets and her ten dollars for the pool. "I'm trying to figure out how this is the most wonderful time of the year for you when I can't picture it correlating to any specific sextivities."

"You've obviously never seen Pepper in her cheerleader get-up."

"I'm pretty sure your wife would murder you on the spot if she knew you were bragging about that."

Tony shrugged while he glanced through Darcy's picks. "What was the particular method for your madness this year?"

"Overall team hotness," she answered. "It required me doing hours of research looking at photos. Some very hard work was put into those brackets."

Tony shook his head as he saw the winner on her last bracket. "I've seen Duke play. There's not a single handsome fella around."

"True," Darcy smirked. "But there's lots of big feet and hands."

Tony rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. "There is such a thing as being too big, you know."

"There is such a thing as lying to men to make them feel better about themselves, you know," she shot back.

"And I'm done with you for today," he announced as he cruised by her desk. He quickly collected money and brackets from both Fury and Sitwell, who always played along during March Madness but swore to never show up at Tony's house for the big party on the first day of games. He then dropped off the paper and bets he'd collected so far and left them for safe keeping in Pepper's office before continuing his stroll through the school halls to amass everyone else's picks and hard-earned cash.

Bruce only entered one bracket. "Arizona and Cincinnati in the final game?" Tony questioned. He ignored his bestie-with-testes's shrug as he studied the paper more. "Bruce? Bruce. Please tell me you did not pick winners by seeing which team comes first alphabetically?"

"I don't care about basketball, Tony."

"No, you're one of the few freaks of nature who can stand watching cricket. On television, no less." He sighed. "Sometimes I question my friendship with you."

Bruce gave him an easy smile. "Who else is going to put up with you?"

Tony waved him off as he kept going down the hall. Bucky's picks were decent. Steve's were miraculously good compared to his usual fare of picking by team color. Tony asked him if he was sucking good sports sense out of Bucky's dick, but Steve's answer was to glare at him before closing himself off in his classroom. Tony did not, however, miss the sound of Bucky's snicker in the background.

Natasha's brackets were a complete mess. There was no way she was going to win any money from the pool. "Who helped you with these?" he asked, his face twisted in horror as he looked through her three sheets of supposed winners.

She shrugged. "A few kids were bored during recess, so they gave me some pointers."

Tony thought back to earlier in the afternoon and vaguely remembered seeing Natasha seated at one of the picnic tables on the playground with a few of the less-popular kids at the school.

“Dammit, I can’t make fun of you for that.”

He made another drop off to his wife’s office and made sure she’d be ready to leave in five minutes.

“You know you’ll take at least fifteen with all your side commentary and premature gloating,” Pepper pointed out.

“Premature? You make it sound like my picks need Viagra, when I can assure you they are solid as a rock and living fully up to their potential.” He paused to lean in closer. “I can show another thing later that doesn’t require Viagra.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Pepper shot back.

Tony’s jaw dropped as his hand went to his chest. “My own wife saying such heinous things.”

Her eyebrows rose at the accusation. “Is there another person who could serve as an expert on the subject?”

“Not since our first date, hand to God.”

She shook her head but smiled. “Go get the rest of your brackets so we can go home and you can pull the fine art off the walls of our home to scotch tape sheets of paper everywhere.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied as he scurried out of her office. The upstairs crew didn’t much promise for decent picks either. He could barely read what teams Danvers said should win. “Does this say Columbo? Is that a state now? Did I miss something? Have we started naming universities after late, great TV detectives?”

Carol snatched the sheet out of his hand, and he hissed at the paper cut it caused. She squinted at the sheet a second before announcing, “Creighton.”

Tony took the sheet back and stared. “In what language?”

“In the language of I’m supposed to have a date tonight but it’s not going to happen if I don’t get these damn progress reports updated. Anything else?”

“No, ma’am,” he answered with a salute. At the door, he spun to face her once more. “You know, you could just have your date on tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night is watching the games at your house,” she replied with confusion.

“Yeah,” Tony said. Her face didn’t change, and there was no way he was going to step on that land mine. “You know what? Forget I said anything.”

His last stop was the library, which he entered with a hand thrown over his eyes. “I’m loudly announcing my presence so that pants can be zipped and I won’t be blinded for life.” When he peeked between his fingers, all he saw was Coulson’s glare and Barton’s middle finger. “Oh good,” he declared. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” Clint handed over their bracket entries with a twenty dollar bill. Tony nodded, impressed, at Coulson’s sheets. “Not bad.”

The librarian shrugged. “Just a simple series of factors based on records and strength of schedule.”

“Finally,” Tony sighed with relief. “Someone who can make picks with science in mind.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Don’t let him fool you, he still hates college basketball.”

“The one-and-done mentality is abhorrent,” Phil argued. “Those young men should be more concerned about getting a degree than the infinitely small chance they have at a successful career in the NBA.”

Clint shook his head. “He was going to make picks based on the team’s average GPA. Do you know how long it took for me to talk him out of that?”

“Why did you marry him?” Tony questioned.

The fifth grade teacher shrugged. “Super desperate for sex and someone to do my laundry.”

Carol collapsed onto the bar stool with a sigh and took a moment with closed eyes to celebrate the fact that she was only fifteen minutes late. “Hi,” she breathed as she shucked her coat and shoved it and her purse under the bar.

“Hey,” James returned before a quick kiss. “I would’ve ordered your favorite beer but it sounded like you might need something stronger after today.”

Carol sighed and rolled her eyes. “I swear ninety percent of my job is paperwork. You should be thrilled I was only fifteen minutes late.” She paused to look up at the TV over the bar. “And now the Celtics are losing.” She hailed the bartender and ordered a drink strong enough to raise James’s eyebrows. “How was your day?”

James shrugged. “I’ve had better. Spent an hour talking with Pepper this morning.” Carol’s face must have given away her curiosity because he shook his head. “Not one of yours.”

“Damn,” she muttered. “Work day might be a bit easier if you were part of it.”

He smiled and bumped his knee against hers. “You get your brackets into Tony?”

She nodded. “Not sure I’ll win any money, but why break with tradition.”

“Was he able to read your picks?”

Carol shot him a dirty look. “Most of them.”

James raised his hands in defense. “I’m just saying I’ve seen your grocery list. Not sure anyone could decipher that mess. But speaking of planning for food, what should we take to the thing tomorrow night?” James asked.

“Thing?”

“Yeah, at Tony’s. What are we going to take?”

Carol couldn’t help but look at him with confusion. “I have a thing at Tony’s tomorrow night. I didn’t know you did, too.”

He shrugged broad shoulders. “He invited me, and I didn’t want to turn down the opportunity to hang out with both my best friend and my girlfriend.” Carol didn’t immediately respond, which caused his face to fall. “But I don’t have to go if you don’t want me to,” he said quietly.

Carol felt her stomach sink at the offer. She couldn't really place her uncomfortableness with mixing her work friends with her boyfriend, and it seemed ludicrous especially since she found her boyfriend through a work friend.

"I just thought," James continued, "after I was at the brunch thing that it would be okay, but if that's not the case, I'll just hang out with my co-workers. Who, by the way, I wouldn't have a problem introducing you to."

The conversation was put on hold as they ordered dinner and got caught up on other games during a halftime update. Not that Carol was listening to anything the sportscaster was saying; no, she was too busy trying to find a handhold to climb her way out of this hole. After a five minutes of strained silence she admitted, "I suck at this."

"Picking winning teams?" James asked while keeping his focus on the television above the bar.

"No, at *this*," she said waving a hand between them. "High school relationships were pointless, except for screwing you up later in life. I didn't fraternize in the Air Force. By the time I got to college, I was older than everyone else and didn't want to put up with their immature shit. I've had some relationships since then, but usually not anything to write home about. And if a guy does stick around for more than a month, he usually turns out to be someone I don't want to introduce my friends to. They're really good at telling me that they knew all along things wouldn't work out, or at least Jess is. Not that she really has any room to talk."

James nodded slowly as he took in Carol's words and finally turned to face her. "So you don't want me to be around your friends because they'll just rub it in your face when we break up?"

"No. No, no, no." She paused to curse under her breath. "Obviously, if someone is going to fuck things up, it's clearly going to be me." She ran a hand through her already crazy hair as she tried desperately to find the right words and ignore the feeling that wonderful things were slipping through her fingers. "I just... I'm used to dating assholes that I meet online, and you could not be further from that if you tried."

"So what am I supposed to do, Carol?" She cringed at the hurt in his voice. "Am I supposed to just stay away from all your friends until you're comfortable with things? Even though one of your friends is also my best friend?"

"I know—"

"Well, just let me know when you're ready to let me into your life instead of shoving me into a dark corner," he shot back as he signaled for the bartender.

Carol grabbed his hand out of the air and pulled it back down to the polished wood counter. "Please don't do this."

"We've been dating for five weeks," James said. "I understand if you're not ready to meet my family members yet, but I at least thought it would be okay by now for me to be around your friends. But if it isn't, then I have a serious problem with that."

"Please come tomorrow night," Carol begged. She hated to admit it, but that's exactly what it was. "Look, this is just a really busy time of the year for me—transition meetings for my students going into middle school, paperwork out the ass, and getting ready for state assessments. I know that's a terrible excuse for me acting this way, but please."

James stared at her for a minute and she wondered if he stared at Tony the same way while trying

to decide if his crazy was worth his time. And that made Carol feel even more like a steaming pile of shit. “Okay,” James said.

“Let’s talk side bets, shall we?” Tony asked, slinging his arm around Clint’s shoulders. Clint shrugged him off, rolling his eyes, and Tony huffed at him. “Okay, I think it’s official: Coulson’s dick shoots spoil-sport serum instead of—”

“I will actually vomit if you finish that sentence,” Natasha said calmly, and Bruce ducked his head to keep from laughing.

Clint smirked. “What, you don’t want to hear me and Stark discuss the massive amounts of morning head Phil gets?”

“I’m starting to rethink my position on morning head,” Phil muttered into his beer, and Clint reached around to pat his ass—and listen as Stark bitched about being blinded.

Clint’d never really cared about March Madness before Stark’d shown up with his love of happy hours, betting pools, and ridiculous basketball-themed parties, and he still didn’t invest in the whole thing the same way he jumped into college football. Winning a couple bucks always felt pretty good, and he enjoyed watching Stark squirm as his “scientifically accurate” brackets fell apart at the seams, but he mostly showed up for the food. Catered food, with sandwiches, veggie trays, three kinds of mayonnaise salad, and more chips than anybody could ever eat—never mind the beer.

Plus, basketball party hats meant for a kid’s birthday party. Only Darcy’d bothered to wear one around, but Tony’d stuck them to a variety of surfaces to prove a point.

Clint watched as Pepper removed one from a ceramic sculpture thing and hid his smirk behind his beer.

“Okay, but seriously,” Tony pressed, “most of the people in this room are horrible at predicting winning teams, so I thought we might sweeten the pot this year with a little side action. Because nothing says ‘American sportsmanship’ like wagering on—or against, against is okay, too—your coworker’s personal lives.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, but standing next to her, Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Should I even ask?”

“You should, my platonic life partner in science and sobriety, and since you sort of have, I will tell you.” This time, Tony slung an arm around Bruce’s shoulders, and the other man allowed it. “I’m thinking there are three particular areas of interest, this time around.”

“At least he’s not pretending like his office pools are new,” Phil commented, tossing Clint a quick glance.

Clint grinned, and Natasha snorted. “This is the first time he’s made it this official,” she pointed out. “I worry for the future.”

“Says the woman who cleaned up on the ‘when will Jessica Cage have a bun in the oven’ bet,” Tony jumped in, pointing a finger at her. She shrugged and sipped her drink. “Still my greatest personal tragedy.”

“Because you lost?” Bruce asked.

“Because I didn’t consider a pre-wedding conception. You’d think a guy would learn.” Bruce

rolled his eyes at that, and Tony squeezed him around the shoulders before releasing him. “Anyway, three main pots—that’s with one T, not two—to choose from. First: which member of the dynamic Rogers-Barnes duo will propose, and when?”

Natasha shook her head. “Not everyone is in a hurry to get married,” she pointed out. Clint cleared his throat, and her mouth twitched into a smile as she glanced at him. “Present company excluded, but I didn’t know him well enough to talk him out of it.”

“Like you would’ve succeeded,” Clint shot back.

“You’re not the one I meant,” Natasha returned, and Clint elbowed Phil when he snickered.

“Stop being so overly sweet, blondie and his boyfriend have that covered and I take it on good authority that I’m awful at the dentist.” When they all frowned at him, Tony jerked his head over toward the couch. Steve and Bucky, along with Darcy, Carol, Pepper, and Tony’s friend Rhodes, were gathered around the television, watching two lower-ranked teams duke it out. Steve and Bucky were practically on top of each other, Steve’s arm around Bucky and the two of them laughing together. “As you can see,” Tony said, “they’ve got in bad, and as I understand it, the Barton-Coulson relationship arc—”

“Nice to have something named after us,” Phil remarked, and Clint grinned at him.

“—suggests wedding bells in the very near future. Or at least a mangagement ring—”

“That cannot actually be a thing,” Bruce said.

“—and a very long engagement during which we listen to them bitch about colors and flowers and cakes and photographers and everything else two men could possibly bitch about when it comes to weddings.” Tony glanced back to Clint and Phil. “Present company excluded again.”

“To be fair, it was less a proposal and more us needing something to do on our anniversary,” Phil replied.

“You’re such a romantic,” Clint returned, but Phil’s smile kind of killed his mock-annoyance right out of the gate.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Second,” he continued, “we have a bet about when Darcy Lewis will finally and miraculously unclench, because something’s *made* her clench and I don’t like it.” Phil, Bruce, and Clint all stared at him, but Natasha sipped her beer calmly. “Seriously, she’s a little black rain cloud of fluffy hair and misery, and it makes everything about six times more horrible than usual.”

Clint glanced over at the couch, where Darcy was swearing about a missed three-point shot. “She seems okay now,” he noted.

“Now, yes. Lately, no. And I don’t know how I feel about her keeping a flask in the bottom drawer of her desk, which is bound to happen if this whole cranky, introspective phase continues.” Tony shook his head. “Anyway, and then there’s the last bet: when exactly will Carol actually admit, aloud and with words, that she likes my best friend.” When Bruce tipped his head, Tony waved him off. “Not you. My other best friend, the one who needed my help to find a terrifying girlfriend.”

Natasha grinned. “I’m glad you still find me terrifying.”

Tony pointed a finger at her. “I will always find you terrifying. You are a very large amount of scary in a very tiny package, and—” Cheers erupted from about five of the seven people over by

the TV, and Tony jerked around to look at the screen. “Wait, who just scored? I swear, if my bracket falls apart this early, I am going to need counseling.”

He wandered off then, drawn to the TV like an ADHD moth to a flame, and Clint grinned at Bruce. “You ever worry that he’s actually certifiably crazy?” he asked.

“‘Worry’ implies I don’t already know,” Bruce deadpanned, and the rest of them cracked up.

Tony drifted around from group to group, trying to sell everybody on the whole ‘side bet’ thing, though Clint guessed from the way Steve and Bucky laughed at him that he didn’t include their bet in the explanation. A good hour later, after they’d actually started watching the games, Clint headed over to the food-and-drinks table to get a fresh beer and found Carol there. He grinned at her. “You hear about the side bets?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “You mean Tony’s desperation to marry off all his friends?”

“Just make sure you wear something slinky to the wedding,” Clint joked, and she flicked him off as she added some chips to her plate. “But FYI, one of his bets is about you and your new guy, too.” She stopped, her hand in the Lays bag, and glanced over at him. He shrugged. “Something about you admitting that you like Rhodes. To me, it’s pretty obvious, but—”

“Jesus,” she huffed, “this is *exactly* why—” Clint blinked at her as she cut herself off, shaking her head. She dropped some more chips onto her plate before forcing him a quick, tight smile. “Thanks for the heads up.”

Clint frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m golden,” she said, a lie if Clint’d ever heard one, and she headed back to the couches without another word.

“Those are my fucking kids!” the Garrison children’s mother yelled, and when Sitwell put his hand up to stop her from running out of the office, she slapped it hard enough that he cringed.

“We really need you to calm down, Miss Garrison,” Pepper said gently. She reached to put a hand on the woman’s shoulder, but she twisted away. “It isn’t good for Macy or Devon for you to be—”

“Screw you,” the woman snapped, her glare so wild that Pepper stepped back.

In hindsight, the decision to let Rhodey come collect the Garrison children and place them in state custody at the end of the school day was maybe a foolish one, but he’d looked desperate as he sat across from Pepper’s desk two days earlier. “She dodges us every chance she gets,” he’d explained, shaking his head. “I don’t know whether she’s read the writing on the wall or she just doesn’t think this is a big deal, but either way, she won’t return my calls and she’s never home when I or one of the other workers come around.” He’d met Pepper’s eyes over the desk. “You and Sitwell both tell me they’re still missing school. Grandpa says that Mom’s transient or at least drifting between a couple different addresses. Tony texted—”

Pepper’d blinked. “Tony as in my husband?”

Rhodey’d quirked a smile at her. “You know it’s bad when Tony’s worried enough that he’ll text me as his social worker friend and not his ‘delicious human street cred,’” he’d returned, and she’d rolled her eyes as she shook her head. Rhodey’d leaned forward in his chair. “It won’t be a big thing. I’ll come in with another worker. She’ll take them home, I’ll explain the first steps to Mom. We’ve got the court order on standby.”

Pepper'd nodded slightly, frowning. "I don't like the sounds of this," she'd admitted, and he'd offered her a sideways grin. "And now you're doing the thing where you think I'm worrying about nothing," she accused, pointing a finger at him, "but Rhodey, this is their school. With everything that's going on, it might be the only safe place they have. And I don't like the idea of it accidentally turning into a zoo because their mom—"

"I know," he'd said, raising his hands, and she'd narrowed her eyes. He'd sighed. "Pepper, I know, but what other choice do I have? I can't chase her around forever, and meanwhile, her kids aren't getting to school, they're showing up dirty and tired, they're maybe not even sleeping in a bed, and —"

"I didn't say no," she'd interrupted, shaking her head. "I don't even have the power to say no. I just don't like it."

"I don't either," he'd replied, and they'd ended the conversation there.

Pepper'd texted him a few days later—the first day in a week that Macy and Devon actually made it to school before noon. She worked hard not to pace around her office, spending a lot of time drifting in and out of classrooms and checking in with some of her frequent-flyer students. She watched Clint balance on his desk to prove a point about a novel to his students, helped Carol proctor a math test to a handful of ADHD fourth graders, and reshelved a few books in the library with Phil.

Rhodey and the other social worker arrived five minutes before the final bell. The Garrison children's mother arrived five minutes after. And the second she saw Rhodey— Well.

Jessica Drew and the other social worker managed to corral Macy and Devon into a classroom before the yelling got too loud, and Mrs. Garrison let Pepper and Rhodey gently lead her into the office.

Pepper tried three times to remember the woman's name, but she kept coming up blank. She berated herself for that as she watched her pace around the office, agitated as a caged lion. She also hated that Fury's district-wide principal's meeting was *today*, of all days.

"You don't get it," Mrs. Garrison said, her fingers twisting in her messy hair as she looked between Pepper, Rhodey, and Sitwell. "You have kids? 'Cause if you had kids, you'd understand that those are my kids. My *babies*. And you can't just sweep in and take them from me, like my fucking dad tried to do, that's not—"

"We're not taking them from you permanently," Rhodey interrupted, spreading out his hands in front of him. The woman stared at him, wide-eyed and teary. "It's like I told you the last couple times we met, Diane, it's just until we're sure that your life's settled down enough that you can take care of them. Give them everything they deserved. Remember how we talked about that?" She nodded roughly, and Pepper watched as her shoulders started to soften. "We're going to help you figure your life out so you can do that. But that means, right now, you need to let us take them for a little while."

"They're my babies," Diane—Pepper repeated it to herself three times to make sure she'd remember—murmured.

"Yeah, they are," Rhodey agreed, and offered her the first smile since she'd started yelling.

Pepper hovered behind Rhodey as he supervised a quick exchange between Macy, Devon, and their mother, and she sat with the kids as the other social worker called their grandfather to come down

to the school. Jessica Drew kept chattering to Macy about anything that popped into her head—books, movies, bodily function, various insects—but Pepper ended up sitting next to Devon and soothing him as he sniffled. Only after their grandfather picked them up did she walk up to the computer lab to find Tony.

“We’re going home,” she informed him, and he jerked his head out from under a table fast enough he almost bumped it. “Get your keys.”

“Is this a sexy going-home, or another kind?” he asked, and she at least managed to roll her eyes as she walked away.

Her mind kept tripping over itself on the ride home, on their quick stop to pick up sushi for dinner, and as she changed into comfortable clothes at home. Tony pattered around her, offering various things—extra wasabi, her bathrobe, a foot massage—and finally, she set her chopsticks down and sighed. “I’m sure you heard about the scene that Diane Garrison caused after school today.”

He shrugged. “A little birdie with a dog named Birdie might’ve mentioned something about crazy screaming mothers in the front office. But since I thought the whole point of having Rhodey pick up the kids at school was, you know, having Rhodey collect the kids, I don’t see—”

“I just hate how this happens,” she cut in, and Tony buttoned his lip to nod at her. “This isn’t the first or the last time one of our students has gone into foster care, but I just feel so impotent about it, you know?”

“Speaking of impotence, that’s the second comment you’ve made about conditions requiring little blue pills this week, a guy could get a complex.” Pepper sighed and returned to her sushi, poking it idly with one of her chopsticks. “Okay, okay, bad joke, sorry.” When she glanced up again, it was in time to watch Tony move over to the chair next to her at their kitchen table. He bumped their knees together. “But sweetheart, you know how this works. And you know that you did the right thing.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t feel like the right thing.”

“Right now? No. But long term, it will. I promise.”

He reached over to wrap his hand around hers, squeezing, and she forced a tiny smile. “You’re probably right,” she admitted.

“Uhm, I’m sorry, have you met me? I’m definitely *always* right.” She snorted the start of a laugh, and he squeezed her hand again. “Also, I made you laugh, which means I win tonight’s serious conversation,” he added, and she rolled her eyes at him as she returned to her sushi.

The Accident

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: **the_wordbutler** and I beat up Thor in this chapter, so it will deal with him being injured and how that will affect his kids. We are horribly mean people.

The planetarium's senior staff were only halfway through their weekly meeting when Ian, Jane's intern's intern, came busting into the room. He held out her cell phone. "You need to take this."

"Why did you answer my phone?" she asked harshly.

"Because it wouldn't stop ringing," he answered as he shook his hand to draw her attention back to her cell.

She took it from him and barely caught Heimdall's name on the caller ID before asking, "Hello?"

"Jane," he rumbled, "you need to come to the hospital."

She was fairly certain that Heimdall continued talking after that, but she couldn't hear anything but this loud buzzing sound. Immediately, her mind began to spin worst-case scenarios. Thor'd been responsible for taking the kids to school that day since she had to come in early to prepare for the meeting. Had something happened on the way to school? Had something happened at the school? Her mind was sucked into a whirling vortex of gruesome imagery.

"Jane? Jane, are you still there?" Heimdall asked.

She swallowed around her heart in her throat. "The kids? Are they okay?"

He sighed. Jane knew from his tone of voice that he was trying to be patient with her. He'd probably already told her three times what'd happened, but she was in too much shock to listen. "The children weren't with him. He was half a mile from the school when it happened."

"When what happened?" she asked shakily.

The pause in his answer added a few more knots to her stomach. "Why don't you find someone to drive you here? By the time you arrive, the doctors should know more."

His non-answer paralyzed her with fear. "So he's not dead?" Jane questioned.

"No." She breathed a sigh of relief at his answer, but wasn't ready to hear the rest of it. "They have, however, taken him into surgery."

Jane ended the conversation and quickly informed her eavesdropping co-workers what little she knew. Her boss volunteered to drive her to the hospital in her SUV with his assistant following them so that Jane wouldn't be stranded at the hospital without a vehicle.

On the drive there, Jane called Thor's parents, who swore to come as quickly as possible. She left a voicemail for Loki to call her back, not wanting to leave a message full of fear and uncertainty. Her next call was to the school. Jane informed Darcy that Thor'd been in accident. "I don't know much

more than that. Don't tell the kids yet, wait till I have more news, but if you could keep Goran and Alva there somehow this afternoon, I'd appreciate it. I want them all in one place if someone has to come get them."

"Not a problem," Darcy answered. "They can hang out with me in the office if they have to. Don't stress about it."

"Will you tell them what happened? I know that's asking a lot from you, but I don't want to leave the hospital once I get there, and they'll be terrified if they're sitting in a waiting room."

"Of course," Darcy promised. "Do you want me to give Miss Potts a heads up? She can help tell them, too. And I can send a warning email to their teachers."

"Yes, thank you," Jane replied, feeling a tiny bit of pressure escape from her chest.

"He'll be fine, Jane," Darcy reassured. "It's Thor. I'm not sure anything could ever hurt your mountain of a husband."

Jane tried to find solace in her words, but couldn't. Yes, her husband seemed invincible, but she knew otherwise. She hung up the phone and spent the rest of the trip to the hospital replaying the few conversations she and Thor'd had about how things could go wrong on construction sites and the life insurance policy that was set up in case something like that happened.

Her boss dropped her off at the emergency room entrance, and true to his word, Heimdall was standing guard near the door waiting for her. Jane ran up to her husband's right hand, and before she could start another barrage of questions, his broad arms wrapped around her slim shoulders and he pulled her into a hug. She wanted to fight the contact at first, but instead closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was pressed against Thor's torso instead.

"He is in surgery," Heimdall said, his deep voice rumbling in his chest. "But that is all they will tell me since I am not family."

"Where?" Jane demanded as she pulled away.

He led her by the hand into the waiting room, and twenty agonizing minutes later, a nurse in surgical scrubs came out to give her an update. His worst injuries were a pair of broken ribs that had caused his left lung to collapse. Thor'd also suffered a compound fracture in his left leg that would require screws to set. He had a concussion and lacerations and bruises all over. The nurse promised to come back out to give any new developments and let them know when he was out of surgery.

"What happened?" Jane again asked Heimdall when they were alone. She tried to switch into scientist mode—learning all the facts and piecing together the information into something logical. Because logic didn't threaten to rip her heart in half like the thought of losing Thor did.

"He dropped the children off at school and called me to discuss the day's business. He was driving through the intersection at Main and Fourth. The rain caused a semi to hydroplane through its red light and it t-boned Thor's truck." Heimdall paused to swallow. "He was still on the phone with me when it happened."

"He say anything?"

Heimdall shook his head. "I heard the impact and tried to get him to talk, but he didn't, so I ended the call to reach out to emergency services. I was a mile away when it happened and drove toward the school until I found him." He reached out to take Jane's hand, and it was only then that she

realized she was shaking. “The truck is a loss, but it can be replaced. Thor is young and virile; it will take more than a semi to stop him.”

Pepper loved her job. She loved working with the children and their families, she loved using art to help them, she loved her colleagues’ dedication to their students, she loved that the people she worked with had, over the last several years, become very dear friends.

But some parts of the job, she could do without.

She’d broken hard news to students before—family deaths, illness, emergencies—but it somehow felt harder to stare into the faces of the three Odinson children. Her office’d felt too claustrophobic for all of them, so she’d corralled the kids (with Darcy’s help) into one of the conference rooms, but she’d known the second she closed the door how much it spiked the childrens’ anxiety. George and Alva’d swarmed around Darcy’s desk like tiny, clingy bumblebees when Darcy’d brought them into the office, demanding to know why they were staying at school and whether it was some kind of special surprise. Darcy’d kept them occupied with suckers and a game on her cell phone until they’d had more news.

Then, Pepper’d collected Henry, and she’d brought them all down here.

George and Henry sat in swivel chairs and Alva in Darcy’s lap as Pepper walked over to the table. She sat down next to Darcy, as close to them as she could manage. The boys looked at one another, silent and suspicious, and Pepper pulled in a deep breath. “The very first thing I want to tell you is that everyone’s safe,” she said, her voice calm and steady. Soothing, she hoped, the way she’d always tried to be, even before she started working with children. “You’re all safe, and your family is safe, too. Okay? That’s the most important thing, and I want you to remember it if you get scared or sad in the next couple minutes.”

George tucked his legs up on the chair, still quiet, but Alva frowned. “Why are we going to get scared and sad?” she asked.

“You’re always scared,” Henry snapped.

Darcy shot him a sharp look, but Pepper smiled softly. “Everyone gets scared sometimes,” she said. Henry huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. She almost chuckled, but the seriousness of the situation struck her again and she sighed. “But the reason you might get scared or sad, Alva, is that there was an accident this morning, and when the accident happened, your dad got hurt.”

The immediate reactions from all three children nearly punched Pepper in the stomach. Alva’s face crumpled, her eyes immediately filling with huge, wet tears. George stared at his feet, his expression almost confused. Henry paled, his whole body loosening—at least for a moment.

“He gets hurt lots of times,” he replied, almost dismissively. “He hits himself with hammers, he dropped frozen chicken on his foot, he’s always fine.” His voice shook slightly, and Darcy reached over George’s chair to put a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off. “He can’t really get hurt, even when it’s an accident.”

“It’s not that kind of accident, Henry,” Pepper said gently, and Henry’s throat bobbed. George angled his chair toward Darcy, and Pepper pursed her lips for a moment before continuing. “This was when he was driving to work. A much bigger truck slipped in the rain and hit his truck. And it —”

Alva, her face half-hidden Darcy’s shirt, let out an immediate, loud sob. Darcy shushed her and

wrapped her up her grip, but her crying only got louder. She was talking, too, the words tear-muddled and impossible to make out.

Still in his own chair, George mumbled, “Alva got mad about her shoes and made us rush.”

The leap in conversation caused Pepper to blink, but only for a moment. “Oh, no, Alva—all of you,” she said quickly, and turned her chair so she could face all three of the kids. “This isn’t anybody’s fault. Not yours, not your dad’s, not the person in the other truck. It was all an accident. Just one big accident.”

George wiped his nose on his sleeve, and Pepper realized that tears were rolling down his face, too. She wished they had a conference room with a couch, and that all the kids could climb on Darcy. She suspected they *needed* it. As it stood, Darcy reached down and put an arm around George. With her eyes trained down on Alva, Pepper could see how upset she looked, too.

Henry, however, was still leaning away from Darcy and his siblings, his arms tightly crossed over his chest. “He’s not hurt,” he said, his voice soft but still resolved. Pepper offered him a tiny smile. “Nobody hurts our dad. He’s okay. He got in an accident but he’s okay, because he can’t—”

The words cracked, and he clenched his jaw to fight against his quivering lower lip. Pepper’d seen that a thousand times from little boys on the playground, all of them afraid to cry over a skinned knee or a twisted ankle. “Do you know what it means when somebody gets a cast?” she asked after a second.

“Means they’re broken,” George murmured.

“Means their bones are broken, dummy,” Henry sneered.

George flinched away from his brother, and this time, Pepper shot Henry the disapproving look. He shrugged at her and tightened his grip on his own arms. “It’s okay if you’re scared, but you don’t need—”

“I’m not scared,” Henry cut in, glaring at her. “My dad’s not hurt. He doesn’t *get* hurt. You’re lying to us because you’re mean, and I don’t like it.”

“*Henry*,” Darcy snapped at him, “you can’t talk to Miss Potts like—”

“She’s a liar!” Henry shrilled, and he shot out of his chair. He pointed a finger at Pepper, his whole body shaking. Pepper scooted forward in her seat, ready to stand up and come over to him, but he inched toward Darcy. “Daddy, he can’t— He’s the strongest, and nobody can—” Tears started falling down his face, and he looked helplessly at Darcy. “Darcy, she’s a liar, he can’t—”

“Your dad *is* super strong, and he’ll be okay in the long run,” Darcy said, and Pepper heard a tremble in her voice, too. “But Pep— Miss Potts isn’t lying, Henry. Your dad’s hurt, and it *sucks*.”

She laid on the last word hard, and Henry lost his last threads of calm. He closed the distance between himself and Darcy and immediately clung to her and Alva, too. George shifted around in his chair so he could push his face into Darcy’s shoulder—and Darcy, wide-eyed and shocked for a second, looked at Pepper.

Pepper smiled at her and mouthed *you’re fine* before she reached over and helped steady George’s sliding chair. And then, again, she repeated the most important thing for the kids, all of them teary and clinging to Darcy. “Everyone’s safe, and your dad’s going to be okay.”

After three hours in the hospital waiting room, Jane—the only one allowed in Thor’s hospital room—came out to the waiting room and told Darcy to take the kids back to the house. “They’re just going to get less bored and more terrified. They need to be at home.”

“I’ll go with them,” Loki volunteered as he rose from his plastic seat next to his mother.

Jane handed over the keys to her SUV, apologized for not knowing exactly where it was parked, and started to dig in her purse for money to cover dinner.

“Don’t worry about it,” Darcy said. “I’ll have them call you before bed. Let us know if anything changes. You staying here for the night?”

Jane shrugged. “Maybe. Depends on when he wakes up.”

The kids hugged their mom and grandparents goodbye. Loki gave in to Alva’s wishes to be carried, and Darcy took the boys by the hand. Thankfully Jane’s SUV was easy to find, and the rain had let up to lessen some of the kids’ anxiety. Darcy drove while Loki tried to engage the kids in conversation, but none of them were really up for it. Darcy made sure to avoid the intersection where the accident happened. She didn’t think the kids would recognize it as the place where their father was hurt, but she and Loki would and she wasn’t ready to deal with that.

Once they were back at the house, Loki tried to set up a bath schedule, but Darcy shook her head. “They should eat dinner first or the baths might be a waste of time.”

“We’re messy,” George acknowledged with a nod.

“Well, then,” Loki said. “What do we want for dinner?”

“I’m not hungry,” Alva answered.

Loki crouched down in front of her and gently squeezed her arms. “You still need to eat, my dear.”

“Can we have pizza?” Henry asked.

Darcy looked in her purse before answering. Pay day was still a few days away, and she may have blown too much money on a couple box sets of DVDs. When she opened her wallet, she found a fifty tucked inside. She removed it and held it up while looking questioningly at Loki.

He gave a small, soft smile. “My mother, undoubtedly.”

“She got into my purse without me noticing?”

“Where do you think I learned my sleight of hand tricks?”

George pointed up at the bill in her hand. “That’s a big number.”

“Yeah, it is,” Darcy replied. “Dudes, we’re getting pizza, breadsticks, *and* dipping sauces.”

“Soda, too?” Henry asked.

“No,” Darcy answered. “Milk or water with dinner rule still stands.” She ignored the boys’ whine and told them all to go play until dinner arrived.

Darcy and Loki quietly picked up the kitchen—washing dishes, emptying the dishwasher, putting abandoned rain boots and backpacks in their proper place. Neither of them talked, not until Alva came running into the room with her eyes full of tears. Darcy scooped her up and held her close.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“The boys are playing Mario Kart and they crashed and it made me think about Daddy. I started to cry and they told me I was being a baby again and it’s just a game,” Alva got out between sobs.

Darcy felt her temper threaten to snap, but before she could go after George and Henry, Loki stalked out of the kitchen with pursed lips. Darcy rubbed Alva’s back and whispered comforting words in her ear while keeping half her attention on what was going down in the living room. Unfortunately, Loki was being too quiet for her to properly eavesdrop, but whatever he did must have worked. A couple minutes later, the pair of Odinboys came into the kitchen looking immensely guilty and apologized to Alva.

“Do you think you can find it in your heart to forgive them?” Loki asked his niece.

The soon-to-be five-year-old shrugged. “I guess.”

Darcy ordered them all to set the table, and by the time they finished, dinner arrived. Despite Mama Odinson wanting to foot the bill for food, Loki paid the delivery man. When Darcy tried to give him the fifty, he shook his head. “You’ve done so much for my family; that is the least we could give you.” She felt a teensy bit guilty as she put the cash money into her wallet, but she wasn’t about to turn down free cash.

Over dinner, Loki told story after story about Thor. The kids’ favorite seemed to be the time Thor tried to go swimming in the neighbor’s pool when they were on vacation, but forgot about the mastiff in the backyard. “I’ve never seen your father move so quickly,” Loki said with a smile. “He came streaking down the sidewalk, barefoot, and his swim trunks kept trying to fall off his body. Father heard the commotion while he was working in the yard and stood grand and tall on the sidewalk. Once Thor passed him, Father leaned down and said ‘Who’s a good dog?’ in this ridiculous voice.” Loki paused to make sure the kids were still hanging on his every word. “The dog just stopped in its tracks and sat in front of my father with its tongue wagging.”

The kids laughed and Darcy smiled. Seeing that their plates were clear and no one was reaching for more, she set up a bath schedule. Ignoring their whines, she went upstairs to help Alva bathe and left the boys on kitchen duty to clean up. By the time Alva was out of the bath, she was having a lot of trouble staying awake while Darcy brushed her hair and helped her into her pajamas. She tucked the little girl into bed and sat on the floor next to her, scratching her back until she was fast asleep. Darcy then laid out an outfit for tomorrow. She went to Jane and Thor’s room and found a basket of clean laundry just inside the door. Loki was putting the boys to bed, and she didn’t want to disturb them to rummage through the dresser, so she dug clothes out of the basket for Henry and George before throwing together a bag of stuff for Jane in case she stayed at the hospital.

She set the boys’ clothes outside the door to the bedroom and carried Jane’s bag downstairs. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she realized Loki was sitting in the dark living room. “Jesus,” she swore with her hand on her chest. “I thought you were still upstairs.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he apologized quietly, but made no move to turn on a light.

“You okay?” she asked as she set Jane’s bag down on the floor.

“I know you probably want to go home since it’s been a long day, and I’m not entirely sure you want to spend any more time around me, but do you think you could just sit with me? Just for a little while?”

She walked around the sofa and sat on the opposite end from him. “I meant what I said about

wanting to be—“

He held up a hand and shook his head. “Tonight is not the time to talk about that. My apologies for bringing it up.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes before Darcy asked, “So your dad just stopped a rampant dog by asking it if it was a good boy?”

Loki nodded. “He spoke with more tenderness to that beast than he ever did to his sons when we were growing up.” Darcy didn’t know what to say to that, and he must have picked up on her unease. “Sorry for that one as well. Perhaps I should just stop talking; my words are getting away from me.”

“You okay?” she repeated.

“As okay as anyone can be when they discover that their indomitable older brother is actually not as invincible as previously thought.” He shook his head and rose from the couch. “I told my parents they could spend the night at my apartment, but I need to go take them my key. Do you mind staying with them a bit longer? I’ll come back as soon as I can so you can sleep in your own bed.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “Would you mind taking the bag I packed for Jane with you?”

“Not at all, that was very sweet of you to do.” Darcy shrugged, not really knowing what else to say. “I meant what I said earlier,” he told her softly. “You are far too kind to my family, and we appreciate it greatly.”

Even in the dark she could see his hesitation, but he shook his head and left the house. Darcy never bothered to turn on the light and instead just tried to settle her thoughts from the day in the dark.

It was still that sort of weird spring half-dark when Darcy woke up the next morning, curled up on the couch with an actual pillow under her head and a blanket tossed over her. She rubbed her eyes before she groped around for her glasses. The clock on the DVR said it was just after five in the morning. Her cell phone, which’d fallen on the floor at some point, had no new messages.

She stretched and started toward the kitchen to at least start the coffee pot. She was halfway there when she realized she smelled coffee—and heard someone talking.

“Your father is unlike any other person I know,” a voice said, low and soothing in a way that kind of hurt Darcy’s heart. She stepped into the doorway to find Loki sitting at the kitchen table with a bundle of pink pajamas in his arms. Alva sniffled, and he rocked her slightly. “You remember the stories I used to tell you, right? Even when we were as small as your brothers, he was bigger than what?”

Alva muttered something.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you. Try again?”

“Than a mountain,” Alva recited. Darcy bit down on a smile.

“And stronger than what?”

“A thunderstorm.”

“And braver than what?”

Alva peeked her head out of Loki’s rumpled t-shirt. “Simba,” she said, grinning.

Loki blinked at her. “I’m fairly sure I never said Simba,” he replied, but he grinned back.

Darcy laughed a little without meaning to, and both Loki and Alva jerked around to stare at her. “Darcy!” Alva announced, and rocketed off Loki’s lap to hug her. She acted like the force of the hug threw her back a couple steps before she picked the kid up, but as soon as she did, she noticed how red and tired Alva’s eyes were.

She brushed Alva’s hair out of her face. “You’re up early, kiddo.”

Alva’s face fell. “I had bad dreams,” she reported, and her lower lip quivered.

“Luckily, she sought out the nearest warm body.” Darcy glanced over at Loki, who’d walked over to the coffee pot and filled up a mug. He added sugar just the way Darcy liked it and shot her a coy smile. “It appears that no one is safe from clinging night barnacles when they sleep in my brother’s bed.”

Alva wrinkled her nose. “You didn’t sleep right.”

“And how is that?” her uncle asked.

“You slept in your clothes, and on top of the covers.” She looked back at Darcy. “That’s not how to sleep.”

“I’ll be sure to report that to the sleep authorities, or whatever,” Darcy replied, and hiked Alva a little higher up on her hip. Alva immediately burrowed her face into Darcy’s shoulder and closed her eyes. Darcy stroked her hair as Loki moved her coffee to the kitchen table. “Thanks,” she said after a minute, coming over.

He smiled slightly. “I figured we would both need the pick-me-up,” he replied. He lingered by her chair as she managed to get herself and Alva into a comfortable position—the kid really was a barnacle this morning—and then sat down next to her. “I can look after them while you go home and get ready for work. I assume you’ll want to shower, and to change—”

“You really think you’re up for getting all three of them ready? Because Thor and Jane do this every day and it still looks like World War Three every time I peek over from next door.” Loki snorted softly, so she nudged his leg under the table. “I can’t go into work until I know what the plan is, anyway. I mean, trying to focus, with everything, it—”

She shook her head, cutting herself off with a sip of her coffee, and Loki spared her another tiny, maybe half-grateful smile. Pretty soon, Alva fell dead asleep on her lap. At least Loki offered to pour her second mug of coffee.

The boys woke up earlier than normal time, too, George quiet and spooked like a fawn in the forest while Henry banged around. “I want waffles!” he demanded when he finally got into the kitchen, craning his neck to inspect the freezer while Darcy dug around in it. Alva, still groggy, poked at her cereal listlessly.

“I know you want them, kid, but I’m not sure there *are* any,” Darcy told him.

“Then I’m not eating breakfast,” Henry countered.

She closed the freezer and glanced down at him. He crossed his arms, sulky and stubborn, but Darcy saw how tired he looked. She sighed. “If I could get you waffles, I’d get you waffles,” she said, crouching down to face him. He harrumphed at her. “But there aren’t any here, there are definitely not any at the Lewis family home for wayward gluten-free health food—”

“You poor soul,” Loki intoned from behind her, and she considered kicking him as he walked by with George’s cereal bowl.

“—and so, that option’s just off the table.” She tipped her head to catch Henry’s eyes. “You want cereal? Eggs? Bacon? Eggs and bacon? Both of them in your cereal?”

“Ew,” George said quietly.

“Because I can do that, but—”

“I want to see my dad.”

Henry dropped the sentence like a nuclear warhead, and everything else in the kitchen went pindrop quiet for a second. Then, all at once, Alva whimpered and George pushed his cereal bowl away from him before he walked out of the kitchen. Darcy glanced at Loki and caught the momentary panic on his face before he went to comfort the crying Alva.

Darcy ran her fingers through her messy hair. Henry stared resolutely at the floor. “Cut you a deal,” she said gently, at a volume just for him. “You pick out a breakfast food—any breakfast food that’s in this house, sky’s the limit—and your uncle’ll whip it up while I go call your mom and find out what the game plan is. Okay? And by the time I walk back in this room, I’ll know about you seeing your dad.”

Henry’s throat bobbed. “Promise?”

“Have I ever lied to you?” He shook his head. “Okay then.” She ruffled his hair before standing. Loki shot her a quizzical look, but she just shook her head as she walked away from the low-level chaos. She managed to step out onto the front stoop before her lungs felt tight and her whole body felt wobbly. Staring up at the finally-sunny sky kind of hurt her eyes, but it beat the burning from tears she really didn’t want the kids to see.

By the time Darcy finished talking to Jane and walked inside, breakfast was over. She heard Loki talking to one of the kids—Alva, probably since the conversation referenced horses—while the boys banged around in their room. She left them to it to go at least recover her coffee cup before she broke the news that they’d need to make it through a day of school before they saw their dad.

She stopped, though, when she discovered a fully-dressed George sitting at the table, stirring his soggy cereal around in the bowl. She walked up and put a hand on the top of his head. “You okay?” she asked quietly.

George nodded, but instead of using his words, he twisted to press his face into her hip. Darcy sighed and rubbed his back. “Yeah,” she murmured as he closed his eyes, “me too.”

The first e-mail to greet Bucky in the morning was an update about Henry Odinson’s father—the extent of his injuries, the fact that he’d spent most of Tuesday in surgery, and the likelihood of the kids not seeing him until after school that day—and Bucky stopped drinking his much-needed coffee to stare at it for a minute. He wasn’t a stranger to frightened kids whose parents were hurt—he’d fielded the fears of students before—but something about it being Odinson punched him in the stomach. Henry talked about his dad like the man hung the stars single-handedly, and Bucky

couldn't imagine the kid dealing with it well.

He hunted Steve down in the hallway after he read the e-mail, and Steve sighed. "Those kids love their dad."

"Like I needed you to tell me that," Bucky retorted, and he angled his body away so Steve couldn't steal his coffee cup. "You ever see them deal with something like this? Just so I know what alarm-level fire I'm going to be putting out with Henry."

Steve quirked a tiny smile. "I don't think so, no," he reported after a minute, shaking his head. "I think maybe there was something with the grandfather—a heart attack scare, maybe—last year, but it all happened over spring break. We just got the heads up in case Henry was still freaked out."

"That's different from it being his dad."

"I know."

Bucky relinquished the last inch of his coffee to Steve and headed down to Bruce's classroom. Bruce removed his glasses and set them on his desk. "George already keeps to himself in class," he said, almost to himself. "I might call Pepper and see if she'll talk to him before things get too intense."

Bucky decided against asking how intense kindergarten could really get. Instead, he leaned against Bruce's desk. "Any tips for Henry?" Bruce raised his eyebrows, and he shrugged. "You know him better, and if there's going to be any meltdowns—"

"Henry's not really one for meltdowns," Bruce provided. "He's more like . . . Well, Molotov cocktails come to mind, but that sounds too much like something Tony would say."

"Or Nat," Bucky retorted, and Bruce snorted a laugh. Bucky felt his own smile slip, though, and he shook his head. "I've dealt with kids who come to school after family stuff a hundred times. Hell, one of my girls at my old school showed up the day after her dad got arrested like nothing ever happened. But Henry's not like other kids."

"You think he won't handle this?" Bruce asked.

"I don't know what to think," Bucky replied.

As it was, the Odinson kids appeared only about five minutes before the bell, corralled into the school by a harried-looking Darcy and a tall, pale man that Bucky'd never met before. "I'm going home to change and shower, but then I'll be back," she said as she half-guided, half-shoved Henry toward Bucky's room. Henry stomped over to his desk, and Bucky raised his eyebrows. Darcy didn't notice. "Jane said to call if anything goes totally belly-up before I get back, but I think we have it mostly under control."

The word *control* was punctuated by a slam in the classroom. Bucky glanced over to see that Henry'd pulled out a notebook and then slammed the top of his desk. Darcy sighed. "Fastest shower ever," she said before she left.

Henry flipped to a blank page of his notebook and started scribbling with a pencil. Bucky watched, and then left him to his own devices.

The first hour of the day went pretty well, all things considered. Henry got really involved in the story they were reading as a class, his head bent low as he read along with Bucky and his classmates, and Bucky thought maybe the initial sulk was the last crisis he'd need to avert. But

during math, Pepper ducked her head in and crouched next to Henry's desk, and—

“No!” Henry shouted, and jerked away from Pepper. Everybody's heads shot up from the math problems they were supposed to try on their own, and Bucky almost lost his balance where he was crouching next to one of the girls. Pepper frowned and reached to touch Henry's arm, but Henry jumped out of his chair. “I don't want to go to your stupid office, I want to stay here!”

“Henry,” Pepper said quietly, “let's not—”

“I'm not going! You can't make me!” He almost tripped over his chair as he made a beeline for the door. Before Bucky could even track him, he was out of the room like a shot, with Pepper right behind him. He knew he should let Pepper handle the situation, but he figured that, if Henry was already against talking to Pepper, it'd only be adding fuel to the fire.

He clapped his hands together. “Okay, math break!” he announced. “How about you guys guy to recess now? With, uh—” He tossed a glance at the specials schedule he kept next to his computer. “Miss Romanoff! Who wants to go to recess with Miss Romanoff?”

The kids all cheered.

Nat was going to kill him.

But Natasha also came when he called, collected all the kids, and sent him only three nasty looks in the process. He left his empty classroom and didn't need to go too far; the default hiding place for most of his second graders was the nearby bathroom, and when he entered the boy's room, he found Pepper standing by a locked stall door. A quick glance under the partition showed that Henry was sitting on the floor. Bucky could hear him sniffle.

“He won't come out or talk to me,” Pepper said quietly.

Bucky pressed his lips together and nodded before he walked up and knocked on the stall door. “Henry?”

“Go away!”

“Yeah, that's not really an option.” Henry snorted loudly. “You don't want to go with Miss Potts, you don't have to, but you know the bathroom rule: you go without asking, I come in whether you like it or not.” Another wet noise escaped from inside the stall. “Don't make me get the janitor like I did with Dean.”

“Dean was making himself into a toilet paper mummy,” Henry reminded him.

“Yeah, well, locking yourself in isn't much better.”

Henry fell quiet again, but after another couple seconds, he shuffled to his feet and opened the stall. His face was red, and he immediately looked at the floor tile when he spotted the two teachers standing in front of him. Bucky glanced at Pepper, waiting for silent permission, and she nodded.

He stepped forward and crouched in front of Henry. “Hey.”

Henry scuffed his foot against the tile.

“Listen, I know today is kind of crazy, yeah? It's weird not knowing what's going on with your dad and what's happening, right?” Henry sniffled and nodded weakly, sparing him one quick glance. Bucky smiled at him. “I got it in one, didn't I?”

"It's stupid," Henry muttered, staring at his shoelaces.

"I'll bet," Bucky returned. Henry fell quiet again in record time, though. "Here's what I think. I think maybe it'd be good if you took a break. Not because you've done anything wrong," he added when Henry looked up at him, "but because everything's kind of weird and scary. You don't have to go with Miss Potts if you don't want, but maybe you could go sit with Darcy for a couple minutes. To cool down."

Henry stared at him for a couple seconds, then dragged his sleeve over his face. "Does Miss Potts still have colored pencils?"

Pepper smiled. "I just got a new box last week with thirty-six different colors."

And despite everything that'd happened in the last couple minutes, Henry's face lit up for a split-second. "Can I use them?"

"Absolutely," she promised, and Bucky grinned as he stepped out of Henry's way.

Once the two of them had left to go to Pepper's office, Bucky found Natasha on the playground with the rest of his class. She elbowed him hard enough that he grimaced. "Some of us have work to do during our planning periods," she informed him.

"Some of us have hysterical Odinsons locked in the bathroom," he retorted. She snorted and rolled her eyes. "What?"

"Henry Odinson is a time bomb when he's upset. Any of the specials teachers could've told you that."

"And here, your boyfriend said he was more a Molotov cocktail," Bucky replied—and winced when Natasha elbowed him again.

Thor eyed the clock and ground his jaw. Jane had left half an hour ago to gather the children for a short visit, the first time he would see them since the accident. His thumb hovered over button for the pain medication dispenser. Everything in his body ached, but Jane said he was absolutely ridiculous while high on morphine, and he wanted a clear head when his sons and daughter were around.

George and Henry burst through the door first. They stopped short when they saw Thor in his hospital bed. He did his best to give a reassuring smile, but the motion pulled at the cuts on his face from broken glass. "Hello," he said.

His younger son gave a small wave while Henry pointed at the monitors. "What are those?"

Thor craned his neck as much as he could. "Those are how the doctors know that I'm getting better."

Jane breathlessly came into the room, Alva settled on her hip. "What did I say about running in the hospital?" she asked sharply.

"Not to," George answered guiltily.

"Gentlemen," Thor said, "come here." The boys edged up to the side of his bed while an exhausted Jane retook her seat on the other side. Out of his one unswollen eye, he noted how Alva tried to completely disappear in her mother's arms. He would deal with that in a moment.

“Sons, listen to me.” He waited until both boys gave him his full attention before continuing. “I need you to obey your mother, your grandparents, your uncle, your teachers, and Miss Darcy. You should do that anyway, but I especially need you to be on your best behavior. Doing so will help me get better quicker. Do you understand?”

Henry and George nodded and Thor gave them as much of a smile as he could. He then turned his attention to his daughter. “How is my warrior princess doing?”

Alva made a small whimper and burrowed even deeper into Jane’s lap. “What’s scaring you?” Jane asked.

The girl took a moment to look Thor up and down before pointing at his left leg, which was wrapped in a cast and had metal work around it to keep pins in place. “Do you remember how over Christmas you and Grandma put together that big puzzle with the horses?” Thor asked.

Alva nodded. “It’s in my room.”

“That’s right,” Jane said, picking up the conversation. “And what did you have to do that was special in order for it to stay in one piece?”

“Glue,” Alva answered.

“That,” Thor said pointing to his leg, “is like glue. My leg was broken and that’s what’s going to put it back in one piece.”

“Darcy said we could sign it,” Henry exclaimed.

“I would love for you all to sign my cast.”

“Can we draw pictures?” Alva asked shyly.

“Please do.”

The girl, obviously growing more comfortable in the foreign room, craned her neck. “What’s that in your nose?”

He reached up with his right hand to touch the cannula strung around his head. “This is to help me breathe better.”

“Does it hurt?” George asked.

“No, that is one thing that does not hurt.” Alva climbed down from her mother’s lap at Thor’s words and walked up to the side of his bed. Gingerly, she stood on her tip toes and paced a quick kiss on his hand. He grinned as hard as he could at her and she smiled back at him. “I feel better already, thank you.”

“When will you come home?” Henry asked.

“The doctors said not for a few more days at least,” Jane answered. “And when he does come home, there will be some things that are different.”

Thor nodded. “I will have to be in a wheelchair for a short time, and then hopefully on crutches in the near future.”

“Baseball season starts soon,” Henry pointed out. “You’re still going to come to our games, right?”

“I would not miss it for the world,” Thor reassured.

“Alright, guys,” Jane said as she stood from the chair. “Time to go home with Grandma and Grandpa. They’ll help you with homework and feed you dinner. Tell Daddy bye.” Hugs were out of the question due to his broken ribs, so Alva settled to kiss his hand once more while Thor bumped fists with his sons.

He waited for fifteen seconds after Jane ushered them all out of the room before finally pushing the plunger for his pain medication. Almost instantly, here was a warm buzz that worked its way through his body and by the time his wife returned, he was silently praising the existence of whoever invented morphine.

Jane came back into the room a few minutes later and cautiously sat on the side of his bed. She had dark circles under her eyes, hadn’t showered since yesterday, and didn’t have a stitch of makeup on her face. Thor thought she was absolutely stunning, and he was positive it wasn’t the pain medication making him think that way.

“You should rest at home tonight,” he told her.

She shook her head. “I’m not leaving you. The kids will be fine.”

“You need to sleep. You can’t do that here with nurses coming in every hour.”

“I can’t sleep in that bed without you. You’ve ruined me,” she said with a hint of a smirk.

“I apologize for my rudeness,” he said with a small smile.

“Heimdall said he’d have a crew out tomorrow to start making accommodations to the house for your wheelchair. They even volunteered to bring the sleeper sofa up out of the basement.”

Thor felt a swell of pride at the intentions of his employees. “I hope they intend to move it back to the basement as well.” Jane smiled but it didn’t quite reach her brown eyes. He took her small hand in his and asked, “What’s scaring you?”

“Everything,” she breathed as tears filled in her eyes.

Thor tugged on her hand and she delicately stretched out next to him in what little space was left in his hospital bed. “It requires more than a semi to take me away from you.”

“Let’s not put that to the test, okay?”

Expecting

“Can I bug you for a couple minutes?” Jessica Drew asked, and Bruce Banner lifted his head from where he was sorting through papers on his desk.

Something that not everyone knew about Jessica Miriam Drew was that, even on her best days, she teetered dangerously on the border of *slightly not-right* and *really messed up in the head*. By the time she’d finished high school, she’d driven away four therapists and made her mother cry on a weekly basis, which had seemed normal at the time but, in retrospect, was not normal at all. She’d spent every day between starting college and finishing college grateful for mental health medication, a really great campus therapist, and her crazy teenage hormones finally evening out. Still, on some days, everything in her past felt like a looming shadow, and she didn’t necessarily enjoy that.

Outside, it was raining, the kind of bleak and hopeless spring rain that sapped all your energy. She’d laid in bed that morning and counted up her sick days because she’d really wanted to stay home. But here in the classroom, Bruce just smiled and set down his papers. “Something bothering you?” he asked gently.

“Not bothering,” Jessica replied, “just—” She waved a hand, and Bruce cocked his head at her, eyebrows raised. “Okay, yes, bothering me,” she admitted. He snorted a little laugh as she trekked over and sat down on the edge of one of his tiny tables. “It’s one of my kids, Macy. You had her a couple years ago, I think you have her kid brother who always wears the—”

“Purple shirt,” Bruce chimed in, nodding. She nodded back as he sat behind his desk. “They’re sweet kids. They just got removed from their mother’s custody a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah, I know, and that’s the problem.” He frowned slightly, and Jessica dragged a hand through her hair. “Look, I know I’m not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I’m good at this teaching stuff,” she explained. “I keep them out of trouble, they freaking love the tarantulas, they’re all progressing the way they should be, I keep up with their IEP stuff with a minimal amount of yelling, whatever, but this *emotional* stuff—” She let out a long, uneven breath and met Bruce’s eyes. “She’s crushed about her mom, Banner.”

A sad little expression—half a smile, half something quieter—flashed across his face. “Devon’s upset, too. I’ve spent a lot of time e-mailing Pepper, trying to find resources for him and his grandfather and to explain what’s happening.” He paused. “I don’t know if we’re making a dent.”

“That’s just the thing: Macy *gets* it.” She dropped her eyes to her fingernails and started picking at her chipped polish. It’d been ages since she went for a mani-pedi with Carol *I’m going to pretend these girly rituals suck and then bask in them* Danvers. “She had a screaming meltdown the other day before music because she didn’t want to learn any more songs if she couldn’t sing them to her mom. She talks about how they have to go to court and how her mom’s in trouble. She knows that this is bad.” She shook her head. “And, I mean, Pepper’s all about communicating with her, getting her to talk about her feelings, but that’s not really—”

She glanced over at Bruce, but he just raised his eyebrows. She huffed out a breath at him. “I’m not really much of an emotional battlement that can hold up the feelings-wall,” she finally finished.

He chuckled. “I don’t think that’s what Pepper’s suggesting,” he commented.

“Yeah, well, I haven’t been fluent in therapist for a long while. Maybe something got lost in

translation.”

“Or it’s hard to deal with someone else letting out their emotions when you’re used to bottling up your own,” Bruce suggested. Jessica rolled her eyes, and he smiled at her. “Macy’s an ‘explode first, apologize later’ kind of child,” he said after a few more seconds, “and right now, she needs to know that her whole world’s not falling down around her. You’re a safe person, probably safer than her grandfather feels right now. If she trusts you enough to throw a fit at you, she trusts you enough to reassure her.”

She snorted. “I’m not the most reassuring person on the planet,” she pointed out.

“No, but you’re the person who comforted twenty-one second-graders when your last tarantula died in the middle of a school day,” he returns, and she presses her lips together instead of replying. “You helped keep everyone calm that time Tony caught the break room microwave on fire and we had to evacuate.” He locked eyes with her, and she swallowed thickly. “You sat with Ann-Marie after we got the call about her grandmother passing.”

“No, Ann-Marie glommed onto me until I couldn’t escape,” Jessica retorted, but Bruce just smiled. She scrubbed a hand through her hair again before she sighed. “I don’t want this to mess her up,” she admitted quietly, looking back down at her hands. “Screwed-up family stuff when you’re a kid, it’s like a cancer. It digs its teeth in somewhere and it grows until it’s inoperable and you’re fucked up for life.”

“That’s how life works,” Bruce replied softly, and she lifted her eyes to meet his. “And no matter if we’re seven or seventy, the way we get through it is by having people who care enough to calm us down after we scream about songs we can’t sing our mothers.”

Jessica smiled a little. “Is that the kind of thing you and Stark say to each other when nobody else is around?”

“Have you ever known Tony to admit emotional vulnerability?” he retorted, and like it or not, Jessica laughed.

They stared each other down for a couple more seconds, almost like waiting for some unseen elephant in the room to drop its other shoe (mixed metaphor be damned) before Jessica hopped off the table. “I’ll try being more, I don’t know, emotionally available. Which sounds like something I’d put on my dating profile, but you know what I mean.” Bruce grinned at her, and she grinned back. “Thanks, Banner.”

“You’re welcome. And if you ever need anything else—”

“I know how to slum it down in the kindergarten room, yeah.”

She was almost all the way out the door and gloriously free when Bruce called after her, “This was just about Macy Garrison, right?” Jessica tossed a glance over her shoulder to see him staring at her. “You seem like something’s bothering you, and I just— I thought I’d ask if anything else is going on.”

Jessica flashed him her boldest, bravest, breeziest smile. “When have you ever known anything to get under my skin?” she replied—and then walked out of the room before he could answer.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Jessica asked one morning. She loomed in Carol’s doorway, coffee in one hand and a doughnut in the other.

Carol squinted at her. “You bring me one?” she asked, nodding to the doughnut.

“I thought you were trying to watch your girlish figure, what with having a boyfriend and all.”

“Ignoring the fact that I run three miles every morning, the day I diet for a guy is a cold day in hell.” She turned back to her overflowing e-mail box. She hated the last couple months of the school year and its endless piles of paperwork. “Besides, he likes my thighs as they are.”

“Okay, didn’t need to know that,” Jessica retorted, and Carol smiled. “I mean, don’t let it stop you from telling me more details in the future, but I still did not need to know that.”

“You are insane.”

“I think that was my middle name for a couple weeks in middle school.” Carol rolled her eyes as Jessica walked over and perched on the edge of one of her tables. “But seriously, what’s the plan?”

“What plan?”

“For the main event a week from Friday?” Carol glanced up at her, and Jessica sighed. “I told you I’d book the room—or corner Steve into letting us use his, because it’s pretty big and already full of paper and string and whatever other crap we want for horrifying games—but that’s all I offered to do. And now, I’m gloriously *done*.”

Carol raised her eyebrows. “You know I have no idea what you’re talking about, right?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Regularly scheduled sex has ruined you,” she replied, “but I’m talking about Jessica’s baby shower.” Carol blinked, and her friend tilted her head slightly to the right. “You know that’s next week, right? Last day before break because she’s off after break? You swore when she announced the bun in her oven that you’d head up the shower creation committee because—and this is a quote—‘nobody else on the staff can be trusted to remember?’” Carol gritted her teeth as a slow-burn grin broke out across Jessica’s face. “Please don’t tell me you forgot, because that would be—”

“Jessica?” Carol asked.

“Yes?”

“You have about six seconds to get out of this classroom before I murder you with that doughnut.”

But even after she left, Jessica’s laughter echoed down the hallway.

Thor came home on a Friday. Jane barely had time to roll him up the new wheelchair ramp in front of the house before Darcy brought the kids home. “I tried to keep them occupied as long as possible,” their neighbor explained, “but they were pretty dead set on seeing their dad.”

“Thanks,” Jane said.

“Anything else I can do?”

Jane shook her head. “You’ve already done plenty this week. Go home and sleep.” Once she was gone, Jane called in their usual Friday night order to the local pizza place. There was a throbbing pain behind her left eye that came with not sleeping the last few days.

She wished tomorrow was a school day, especially when the kids stomped up the stairs to get

markers and began calling dibs on who got to draw on which part of Thor's cast. The in-laws were supposed to come by and take the kids for a few hours tomorrow afternoon, but Jane wasn't quite sure whether or not it would be a terrible idea if they canceled. It wasn't like her sons and daughter had awful grandparents, even if Thor swore that they were completely different people than the man and woman who raised him; it was just that Jane knew there would be a lot of sympathy sugar fed to the kids, and Thor had yet to build a padded room in their home.

From the living room, there were insistent shouts from the kids about who got to draw on Thor's foot. Her husband warned them to be mindful of the bracket and screws around the cast, but he was largely ignored. Jane's splitting headache couldn't handle her children arguing anymore, so she quickly found a yardstick and a Sharpie. Other than ordering them all to move away from their father's leg, she went to work silently. Within minutes, Thor's cast was cordoned off into nearly equal thirds and she'd assigned each child a piece. The rule was they could color, draw, or write whatever as long as they did it silently. First kid to start whining again lost their third to their siblings. Thor shot her a sympathetic smile as she went back to the kitchen.

Once out of the room, she took a moment to breathe deeply. The longer she stood in the silence, the more her eyes burned with hot tears, so she quickly busied herself with mundane tasks: setting out bills that needed paid, checking her work calendar to prioritize meetings and projects, writing out a grocery list. Boring chores she usually hated but now were more than welcome, because it meant not thinking about the hell of this week.

When dinner was delivered, Jane broke the rule of *we always eat at the table* for one night of pizza and a movie in front of the TV.

"We've had pizza a lot this week," Henry grumbled.

"I believe there are still some brussel sprouts in the freezer," Thor replied. "Perhaps you would like that instead?"

"No, thank you," the second grader quickly answered.

After a three-minute debate on which movie to put in, Jane overruled them all and shoved *Return of the Jedi* into the DVD player. By the time Yoda kicked the bucket, she'd cleared away dirty dishes. Before the Ewoks are introduced, she made all the kids go upstairs and change into pajamas; she knew they'd pitch a fit if had have to miss the first appearance of their favorite aliens. While they were upstairs changing clothes and brushing teeth, she was able to maneuver Thor off the couch in a nearly disastrous balancing act so she could pull the bed out of the sleeper sofa.

The five of them crammed together on the sleeper sofa, all three kids between their parents. Alva, curled up against Thor's bandaged chest, was out before Vader and Luke started their final duel; the boys only lasted a little bit longer. Jane and Thor watched the rest of the film in silence. Once the credits rolled, she turned off the TV.

In the darkness, Thor caught her eye. "Do we dare try and move them upstairs?" he whispered.

"I'm not sure about this 'we' you're talking about," Jane fired back, and Thor's grin stood out in the black of the room. "Besides, what if they wake up in the middle of the night, and can't find us in our bed?" Thor nodded his agreement. "Will you be okay? I don't want them to hurt your ribs or leg."

"I have spent too much time away from them. It will be worth the pain."

"Want another round of pain killers?"

“That would be most helpful, yes.”

Jane untangled herself from George’s limbs to get a couple of pills and a glass of water for her husband before she snuck upstairs to quickly change into sweats and finally ditch her bra. She stopped short at the bottom of the steps, her heart caught in her throat. Everyone was asleep and all three kids were using Thor’s right arm as a pillow. In each of the kids’ faces, Jane picked out traits that belonged to their father—eyes, chin, dimples. She was overwhelmed with gratitude that she wouldn’t have to survive life by only looking at those little glimpses of Thor, that he was still there with them.

When she crawled under the pile of blankets to join them, she wasn’t expecting Thor’s hand to reach out. Jane leaned into the touch as his fingers brushed along her cheekbone. “Love you,” he mumbled sleepily.

“Love you, too,” she whispered before kissing his fingers.

“Oh, god, hang on, I *hurt* from—”

“This is not fucking funny, Barton!” Carol hissed, and when he held up a hand so he could keep laughing, she elbowed him hard enough that he almost fell off his bar stool. Carol’d stopped attending payday happy hours around the time Stark’d started suggesting colors for her and James’s wedding china (she’d punch him some day, just wait), but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Namely—

“I don’t know why the fuck you’re asking me, you know,” Clint said once he recovered. He wiped actual tears from under his eyes before he reached for his beer. “We don’t have kids. None of our friends have kids. And the sister-in-law had kids before I even knew she’d end up that way.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is this a gay thing?” he asked suddenly.

Carol scowled at him. “What?”

“I’m just saying, if this is a gay thing, I’m not *that* gay. On a scale of one to ten, with one being Darcy and ten being Steve, I’m around a Tony, because—”

“It’s not a gay thing, you moron, it’s a *you* thing!” Carol snapped at him. The conversation at the next table over—or rather, the Stark-Banner science argument at the next table over—stopped suddenly, and she sighed. “I don’t need your non-existent flamboyance or your horrible fashion sense—”

“Hey, I’m great at fashion.”

“—as much as I need your other . . . assets.” Clint frowned at her, his brow crinkling. She rolled her eyes. “You know the one, Clint.”

“You mean—”

“Yes.”

Clint rolled his lips together for a moment, his face thoughtful, before he released a long, steady breath. “That’s gonna take a lot of bribery, Danvers. You’ll owe me for all the work I’ve gotta do.”

She snorted. “Never heard you call it ‘work’ before,” she muttered, and signaled the waiter to bring Clint another beer.

The tall cup of coffee set before Darcy smelled like heaven, and the scent alone caused some of the tension in her shoulders to drain. Without even looking up to acknowledge the giver, she grabbed the cup and took a healthy sip. She ignored the chaos of the office around her just to savor the perfectly creamed and sugared beverage.

“That bad of day?” a voice—an increasingly familiar voice—asked. Darcy looked up to see Loki standing in front of her desk, a small smirk on his face. Her eyes flickered down to the cup of coffee he’d brought her before looking back up and he shook his face. “It’s from Thor. He insisted I bring it to in the first of a long series of gifts to express his gratitude.”

“Hanging out with your brother today?” she asked, only feeling somewhat better about Loki bringing her yet another cup of coffee.

Loki nodded. “Since he’ll be at home for the foreseeable future, I managed to switch my schedule around to help him out during the day. And since he’ll be home, Jane and Thor decided to take the children out of daycare.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “Sounds like a lot of family time.”

He smiled. “Ten years ago, there’s no way I would have agreed to the arrangement, and now I find myself volunteering for it.”

Darcy leaned back in her chair and, after confirming Fury was out of the building for a meeting, propped her feet up on her desk. “So what’s changed in the last ten years?”

“A few things,” he answered cryptically. “I’ve never done the pick-up thing before. Do I go to their classroom?”

“No, you go the gym,” Darcy directed as she pointed toward Natasha’s lair. “You have to wait in line to sign the kids out. And next time, you might want to get here a bit sooner. The stay-at-home parents and grandparents get here pretty early for their daily social gabfest. So you’re either looking at waiting in the back line and listening to all the gossip, or getting here earlier. You’ll still have to listen to all the gossip, but at least you can leave as soon as the kids are ready to go. I recommend an iPod. That way, you can drown out the nonsense.”

“I’ll keep that in mind; thanks for the tip.” He was about to turn and leave when the office door burst open.

“Uncle Loki!” a voice shouted, and George ran into the room and plastered himself around the man’s leg. “Are you here to take us home? Are we going to the zoo? Can we go play at the park?”

Bruce leaned into the office door with a stern look on his face. “George, where are you supposed to be right now?”

“But it’s my Uncle Loki!” George whined pointing up at his relative.

Loki kneeled down before his nephew. “You need to follow the rules. You can’t run off, even if you’re excited to see someone. Your teacher needs you to be where you’re supposed to be.”

“Sorry,” George apologized.

“I’m not the one you need to say that to,” Loki replied.

George walked out of the office and took his place in line. “Sorry, Doctor Banner.”

“I appreciate that, George. Thank you.” The kindergarten teacher nodded to Loki before corralling his students down the hall.

“You have to follow the rules?” Darcy parroted back with a smirk.

Loki cringed and placed a hand to his chest. “My inner teenage Goth just shriveled up and died, I believe.” Darcy laughed, and Loki smiled at her before ducking his head. “Well, I suppose I should go initiate myself into the daily gossip of stay-at-home caretakers.”

“Good luck surviving that,” Darcy wished as she saluted him with her cup of coffee. “And tell Thor thanks for the coffee. How’s your brother doing, by the way?”

“He’s restless,” Loki sighed. “He is already bored, and I am quickly running out of ideas to keep him occupied.”

“There’s always the option to give him a sponge bath.”

He shuddered. “I will leave that particular duty up to Jane, thank you.”

Darcy watched him leave and, before she knew it, called after him. “A few friends of mine are getting together on Saturday for a zombie marathon. Want in?”

Loki hesitated before shaking his head. “With spending so much time at Thor’s, I’m going to need time to keep up with my studies. I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

She faked a smile and nodded. “Okay. Good luck with the kiddos and the homework.”

“See you around,” he replied before walking out the door.

Darcy took another drink of her coffee and tried to shove down the feelings of disappointment in her chest, as well as the overwhelming amount of thoughts and questions in her mind regarding stupid men and what she wanted. Ain’t nobody got time for that mess.

Phil crossed his arms over his chest. “No.”

“C’mon,” Clint goaded. He nudged his shoulder into his husband’s, and Phil rolled his eyes. Carol pretended to focus on the Thai food she’d brought over, not on their conversation. “When’s the last time I asked you for something, huh?”

“Are we including shower blowjobs in the list? Because according to the three text messages you sent me during planning yesterday—”

“Okay, then when’s the last time I asked you for something because Carol made me?” Clint corrected, and Carol snapped her head up to glare at him. He shrugged, his hands raised. “Sorry, but shower blowjobs—”

“Come first?” Carol finished. Clint flashed her a winning grin. She maturely flipped him off before opening the last container of noodles and turning to Phil. “For the record, he promised he’d be subtle.”

Phil's mouth quirked into a tiny smile. "Subtlety is not his strong suit."

"Is *anything* his strong suit?" she retorted.

"Arguably, shower blowjobs," Phil replied. She pulled a face, more at Clint's lewd gesture than at Phil's response. "But like I've told Clint a hundred times—"

"We gonna talk about how exaggeration's your strong suit?" Clint demanded as he pulled down some plates.

"—I have that account to find him new recipes and to follow my mother's knitting projects, and that's it." Clint snickered, and Phil narrowed his eyes. "Despite what some people might think."

"Some people caught you looking at whole pages of do-it-yourself dog beds," Clint retorted. Phil frowned at his back as he handed Carol a plate and then immediately started helping himself from the cartons on the counter. "He loves it."

"Love's a strong word," Phil points out.

"And one you're probably not applying to your marriage right now," Carol agreed, and the corner of Phil's mouth lifted into another smile. She sighed. "Look, I'm not good at this shit," she admitted. Clint gasped like he'd been shocked, and she kicked him lightly in the back of the leg. "If it were up to me, we'd all chip in to buy her a gift card before going to Xavier's, getting shit-faced drunk on Jessica's behalf, and heading home happy. That's apparently not an option." She caught Phil's eyes. "That's why I need you. And not," she added as Clint started to open his mouth, "because I think men who are married or dating other men are inherently better at this baby shower shit."

"I was actually going to ask if anybody else wanted the lime from the pad thai, but okay," Clint said. He dropped the lime wedge onto his plate and moved on.

Phil held Carol's eyes for a long time. "And you asked me because—"

"Because if you can keep *that* organized and together," Carol replied, jerking her thumb over to where Clint was feeding a bit of pineapple fried rice to the dog, "you can help me with a baby shower."

Clint scowled. "I think I'm supposed to be offended by that."

Phil, on the other hand, smirked. "That's good enough for me."

"Let's start with an easy one, Mister Wilson," Fury said, and Wade's heart climbed into his throat like he was the old lady who swallowed the fly (and other assorted creatures). "Why do you want to be the long-term substitute while Miss Jones is on maternity leave?"

"Cage," Wade blurted without thinking. Fury raised an eyebrow, and he felt his neck go a little red under his collar. "I mean, she used to be Jones, right? But now she's Cage? Or Jones-Cage? Cage-Jones? Barton, help me out here, I swore she—"

Barton sighed. "Wade, just answer the question."

Wade swallowed. Job interviews were always the worst, so formulaic and formal and stuffy. He hated stuffy. He took it on good authority that he was no good at stuffy. He hated his suit, his

uncomfortable shoes, his leather portfolio thing with the virgin legal pad, you name it. You wanted to know whether he was a half-decent teacher? Throw him in a classroom, watch him teach for an hour, and pass judgment that way. Don't force him into a full suit and ask annoying questions about *one time you dealt with a difficult classroom management situation*. Just *no*.

"Wade?" Barton asked.

Wade jerked straight up in his seat. "Uh, well, mostly because of you guys," he replied, and both the men across the conference room table blinked at him. "Look, I've subbed at a lot of schools, right? This district, other districts, private schools, one really scary experience at Montessori that I'm still in therapy for. And they're okay, but you guys just— You're a team." He demonstrated by linking his fingers together, and he swore that Fury almost smiled. "You all deal with stuff like a, I don't know, a unit. Like the Justice League, but with accelerated reader contests and assemblies." He dropped his hands back into his lap. "You're easily my favorite school to sub at because I know I can go to anybody for help, or with a problem, or whatever. I'd like to do that almost every day."

Barton smirked. "Almost?"

"Weekends are a thing," Wade reminded him, and he chuckled.

Fury, on the other hand, never even blinked. It was creepy, and Wade felt his own smile kind of dry up at that. "Long-term substitute teaching isn't like stepping in for one day," he pointed out. "The honeymoon period wears off fast. Kids start to get out of hand. You know how to deal with that?"

"*Totally*." Wade leaned forward in his chair and barely resisted his unprofessional urge to rest on the table. "Here's the thing: I've dealt with nightmare classes in the last couple years. Teachers without sub plans, teachers with impossible sub plans that require an old priest and a young priest to execute, teachers with bad relationships with the class or super great relationships with the class—both of which can totally ruin a sub's day, by the way." Fury nodded a little, and Wade felt some of his nervousness start to unwind. "You can't make it up to classes when it's one messy day where everything goes wrong. You can't fix it, you can't build or rebuild or *re-rebuild* trust, whatever. But you can do it when it's long term. And you can get to know them." He shrugged. "I think maybe that'd help with some of them."

Barton blinked. "Like who?"

"Like the Hell twins?" Wade replied, and he and Barton flinched in unison the second they each recognized he'd used the wrong name. Fury's mouth moved like he maybe wanted to grin, though. "They're awful," he said, holding up his hands, "and they're screwy and they're bullies and whatever, but I think some of it's because everybody already knows that about them. You know? Their reputation stretches so long and hard that I think it's like the biggest Odinson kid, people assume that teaching them's going to be a nightmare, then it *is* a nightmare, and then everybody's like, 'Okay, see, I told you that would happen,' and the kids don't even know why it all went down that way."

Fury pursed his lips. "A self-fulfilling prophecy, you mean?"

Wade blinked. "No, I mean that thing where something becomes a nightmare because you think it'll be a nightmare," he answered, and Barton rolled his eyes.

They went back and forth for a while after that, talking about classroom management and ideas for engaging disinterested kids and Wade's half-started (and presently ignored because, uh, *money*) masters in curriculum and instruction. Wade's nerves started to uncoil by the time he told the story

about the Montessori kid with the blocks and the toilet (man, kindergarteners were *evil*), and he even got Fury to smile.

Well, or he had gas, it was hard to tell.

“We have a few more interviews this afternoon,” Fury said as he reached over to shake Wade’s hand, “but we’ll let you know by the end of the week. In the meantime, maybe don’t make any long-term plans for the next couple months.”

Wade grinned. “I guess the mid-April trip to Cancun to work on my tan is out, then?”

“Nobody needs to think about you in a swimsuit,” Barton grumbled, and Wade practically danced out of the conference room.

He waved the girl after him down to the conference room once he was back in the office and then, for just one second, he basked in his own awesome. Well, at least until he noticed that Darcy was there, in her desk, typing something and frowning. He watched her for a second, her face lined and serious, before he walked up to her.

“Uh,” he said, and she jerked her head up. She blinked at him, almost confused for a second, and he tried on his best not-sheepish smile. “I, uh, are we—” She rolled her lips together, and he sighed. “Are we cool?”

“Cool?” she repeated.

“Yeah, because—” He ran his fingers through his hair for a second. “I won’t be that guy who, like, obsesses or whatever. I’m not even sure it’s in me to be that guy, that guy’s a prick and I hate him. But I thought we were, you know—” He gestured weakly between them. “—and then, you said no, and I just—”

“I know,” Darcy said. The words rushed out, all quick and sad, and Wade watched her shake her head. “I’m working some stuff out, and I don’t think it’d be fair to you for us to try something while I’m still putting it together.”

He swallowed around the sticky, sad feeling in the back of his throat. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She flashed him a really quick smile. “It’s not you, it’s me, and I’m not saying that to be a shitty girl who doesn’t want to tell you my feelings.” He kind of laughed, and her smile got brighter. “What? It’s true.”

“I know, I just don’t think a girl’s ever liked me enough to even use the line on me,” he replied. She rolled her eyes like it was one big joke, but he caught the way her face turned a little sadder. “As long as we’re okay,” he said after an extra second.

“Yeah,” she answered, “we’re okay,” but Wade definitely got the impression that she left out the other part of the sentence, the one where she admitted *she* was maybe *not* okay at all.

“Uh, I’m not judging or anything,” Jessica Drew said after school on Wednesday, her feet up on Carol’s desk and a smoothie in her hand, “but why’s Coulson sending you ten different Pinterest links every hour on the hour?”

“Why are you looking at my e-mail?” Carol retorted. She knocked Jessica’s feet off her desk. “Get out of here!”

“Okay, just for that, no Jamba Juice for you,” Jessica replied, and waved her cup at Carol before she strode out of the room.

Phil stood in the corner of Steve’s art room and surveyed his work. There were touches of pink, but not an overwhelming amount of it. Nothing overly cutesy, just enough to remind people that a baby was being celebrated.

Pepper had helped out and covered catering. There were plenty of little sandwiches and finger foods, as well as enough perfectly iced cookies and petit fours to send everyone into a diabetic coma. Stations of various baby shower activities were set up around the room. The only game that would be played was set up on Steve’s desk. Phil’d managed to get baby pictures from nearly everyone on staff, and people had to match the picture to the co-worker.

One station boasted a stack of newborn diapers and Sharpies. People were instructed to write encouraging notes on them to help the new parents survive diaper changes in the middle of the night. Phil tried to ignore the fact that Tony, Clint, and Bucky were currently marking up a terrifying number of diapers and snickering the entire time.

To Phil’s left, there was a table with a series of stretchy headbands, bows, feathers, buttons, and a hot glue gun. It was interesting to see how some of his co-workers thought which colors worked together, or just how many bows and feathers they could cram on one headband. Thankfully, Jessica just laughed at the crazy combinations and promised to send pictures to everyone when their creation was worn for a day.

There was, naturally, a betting pool everyone could sign up for. Carol manned that station and kept track of everyone’s best guess for date, time, weight, and length of the newborn with ruthless efficiency. Jessica Drew was at her best friend’s side, taking in the money. Phil was a little concerned that the second grade team leader might skim something from the pot to go toward a new pair of high heels, but he didn’t say anything.

“Thanks for this.”

Phil turned to smile at an extremely pregnant Jessica Cage. “Clint and Carol were the ones—“

“Please,” Jessica snorted. “I’ve worked those two for four years now. There’s no way they could pull this off.”

He shrugged. “It was kind of fun. No one we know—well, outside of my sisters—have children. I mean, granted, we work with kids all the time, but they’re not actual babies.”

Jessica let a small grin cross her face. “Sure you don’t want a baby for yourself?”

“No,” Phil chuckled. “Clint and I are just fine with only having Birdie under our care.”

“Are we taking side bets on who the next person who needs a baby shower will be? Pretty sure safe money is on Rogers and Barnes.” Phil’s smile tightened and Jessica laughed. “I knew Clint was a little pissy about your guys’s record mad dash to the altar being threatened, but I didn’t know you were, too.”

Phil shook his head. “They deserve to be happy, no matter what speed they move their relationship at.”

Jessica patted him on the shoulder. “Well, I wouldn’t mind at all returning the favor on throwing

you all a baby shower. I think you two would be good at it.”

“Thanks.” They stood quietly for a moment before Phil gently nudged his shoulder against hers. “You should go open your presents before Darcy does it for you.”

Carol asked everyone to have a seat so they could all watch Jessica excitedly rip off wrapping paper. The staff had chipped in to buy a few remnant items from her gift registry; Phil was fairly certain Pepper and Tony had donated a large amount of the cash that was used to purchase things. Halfway through the presents, Phil felt an arm wrap around his waist. Clint bumped his hip against Phil’s before settling against his side. “Seriously, thanks for doing all of this. You’ve totally earned your shower blowjobs.”

“Plural?” Phil asked with raised eyebrows.

“Definitely plural.” Phil felt Clint’s gaze intensify, and he did his best to ignore his husband’s stare. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Phil answered.

Clint’s head tilted slightly to the side. “Really? Because I know what it looks like when you try to hide something from me. And that face isn’t your fun he’ll-never-find-his-Christmas-presents-this-year face. That’s your distract-him-with-sexy-glasses-and-chest-hair-so-he-doesn’t-suspect-something-is-eating-at-me face.”

“Do you see me taking my shirt off?” Phil challenged.

“Not yet,” Clint shot back with a smug smile before bumping his hip against Phil’s once more. “Seriously—what’s eating at you?”

Phil shook his head. “Something Jessica said. No big deal.”

“Shit,” Clint muttered under his breath. “I have a feeling this ‘no big deal’ is going to be distracting you for days. Which means I’m going to have to be even more distracting.” He paused and shook his head. “We’re going to need pasta for dinner; I’m gonna have to carb up, aren’t I?”

“No,” Phil answered. Because it really was nothing. He and Clint had discussed kids a few times, but they always agreed that their students were enough of a presence in their lives that they didn’t need to mess with the idea. Besides, they had their furry daughter, and that honestly was good enough.

Sure, Phil entertained the thought of a chubby baby with dimples and Clint’s mischievous smile—because there were plenty Coulsons in the world already—but it never went beyond that, and rarely did Phil’s train of thought ever get that far.

His life was fuller than he ever thought possible, and he didn’t dare try and press his luck.

Spring Break

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I love horses,” Alva sighed happily.

Loki didn’t bother fighting the smile that crept on his face since it was just him and his niece (and the horses) around. “They are majestic creatures.”

“I don’t know what that word means,” she replied, looking over her shoulder at him.

They were standing along the fence of the pasture where the horses the Odinson children rode during lessons were kept. It was where Alva decided she and her Uncle Loki should go for their date. Followed, naturally, by ice cream.

Loki’d volunteered to take each child out individually during spring break to help keep Thor sane while he was wheelchair bound in a house full of rambunctious children. Henry had wanted to play laser tag, George wanted to play at the playground without having to fight over the swings with his siblings, and Alva had picked horses.

Loki easily remembered a time not so long ago where spending so much time with family members would have been obscene. Tended to happen to a person when they found out at sixteen they were adopted by parents (or at least a father) who kicked his actual son out of his home. If he was willing to do that to his own flesh and blood, what would he have done to someone who was not? Loki’d decided to save time and not wonder; he left home—if it could be called that—on his own.

It took years to repair the damage done on both sides of the falling out, but the key had been the love of Thor and his three children. He flashed back to the night Henry was born: Thor’d texted him about the arrival of his nephew, and Loki’d sat in the hospital parking lot waiting to watch his parents leave before he entered the building. There were ten minutes left in visiting hours, and it took almost all of that time to do all the security measures to ensure he wouldn’t walk out with a mewling newborn.

He’d never held a baby before meeting his nephew. It wasn’t like his heart instantly melted, but it began to thaw slightly as he joked with his brother about what parts of Henry’s looks he’d unfortunately inherited from Thor.

With George’s birth, he’d been able to tolerate sitting in the waiting room with his father. They’d sat on opposite sides and didn’t talk, but they were at least within ten feet of each other without yelling.

But when Alva was born, Thor’d pulled him aside before introducing him to the baby. “I know our father, whether you think of him as yours or not, wasn’t the best at raising us. But I know now that, despite what we may believe, he was trying.” Loki’d ground his teeth painfully hard in order not to spout some sharp-tongued retort or roll his eyes. “I’m going to err as a father, as well. I need you to help me not become him. Will you do that? Will you help me be a good father?”

Loki couldn’t recall a time when his brother had asked him—or anyone, really—for help. “Of course,” he’d breathed, and was even surprised to realize how much he meant it.

When Alva was placed in his arms, he felt the last tendrils of hatred for his family snap. Of course, he and his father could still argue loud enough to shake the walls, but Loki’d made peace with

things.

“Majestic,” he answered, “means to be royal, special, nearly magical.”

“Daddy calls me his pirate princess. Does that mean I’m majestic?”

“It does indeed,” he said with a dramatic bow, which caused her to giggle.

They stood in silence to watch the horses chomp on grass for a bit long before she asked out of the blue, “Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“Excuse me?” he sputtered.

“I have a boyfriend. Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

His eyebrows rose at that. “Is your father aware of this boyfriend?”

Alva shrugged. “I think I told him.”

“What do you and this boyfriend do?”

“We hold hands. That’s what you do when you have a boyfriend. We were playing on the playground, and he held my hand while we looked for magic rocks. So he’s my boyfriend.”

Loki smiled down at her. “If only it were that easy for people my age.”

“It is,” she reassured. “You just hold their hand.” She stayed quiet for a moment before looking up at him with a frown. “Hey,” she pouted, “you didn’t answer my question. Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

He sighed as he tried to fumble for the words to explain to the not-quite five-year-old that adult life sucked and never worked out the way you wanted it to. “I suppose I just haven’t found anyone as majestic as the great Alva Elinor,” he replied with another deep bow.

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “I can’t be your girlfriend. You’re supposed to marry your girlfriend, and I’m going to marry Daddy.”

“And how does your boyfriend at school feel about that? Aren’t you supposed to marry him?”

Alva shrugged. “He’ll get over it.”

Loki’s laughter caused the horses to look their way. He scooped up his niece and tapped his finger on her nose. “I think it’s time for ice cream.”

“But the horses,” she whined as she clamored in his arms to look over his shoulder.

“The horses will still be there when you have your riding lesson this weekend.”

“You hate babies.”

“I hate *most* babies,” Jessica Drew replied, and Jessica Cage stopped folding a little tiny baby outfit to raise her eyebrows. Jessica waved her off and twisted around on the armchair so that her legs were dangling over one side. “I won’t hate your baby.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“You found it hard to believe that I’d come over and help you fold itty bitty baby crap, and yet, here I am.” She wiggled one of the tiny outfits, and Jessica Cage rolled her eyes. They lounged in the Cage living room, the windows open as they sorted through a second load of freshly-washed clothes. Everything smelled brand new.

Jessica gave it a week into Baby Cage’s arrival before it all smelled like poop and spit-up.

“I know what you’re doing,” her friend commented, and Jessica stopped messing with the snaps on a giraffe-print onesie to glance over. The preggo had a pile of baby clothes balanced on her bump. “Something’s bothering you, and this is a distraction.”

“Or it’s *adorable*,” Jessica argued. She unfolded the onesie and made it dance around in her lap. “Tiny Baby Cage-face, dressed up like a giraffe and—”

“If you call my daughter Cage-face, I will end you,” her friend warned.

“If she gets the Cage-face, I’m just going to feel bad for her,” Jessica retorted, and ducked the balled-up baby socks that immediately flew in her direction.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll hold *again*,” Clint grumbled into the phone, and returned to studiously ruining Phil’s carefully sorted piles of mail.

Phil knew a lot of teachers who seized spring break by the horns, booking spa weekends or cruises like their lives depended on it, but Phil and Clint tried to keep their break pretty low key. They worked a lot on the yard or the house, dragged Birdie on long walks around the neighborhood, and lounged in bed later than absolutely necessary (and still not as long as Clint usually wanted to lounge). Phil stopped off at the school to unbox and label some new books for the library, Clint tried new recipes in the kitchen (and managed to splatter bolognaise sauce on the ceiling), but otherwise, they kept mostly to themselves.

Phil’d actually wandered into their combined office and guest room to suggest they spend a night out—dinner and a movie, maybe, or a trip to the art gallery to catch the exhibit Pepper spent the last three weeks talking up—to find Clint digging through the mail, the phone cradled against his shoulder. Phil’d walked into the kitchen and checked the calendar while Clint hummed along to the hold music.

He’d long since stopped humming and started tapping his toe on the floor.

“Everything okay?” Phil asked from the doorway to the kitchen.

Clint jumped, flinching a little in surprise, and quickly nodded. “Just, you know, dealing with a phone bill thing,” he said unconvincingly.

Phil raised his eyebrows. “A phone bill thing?”

“Yeah, they took us off the cell phone family plan again, I swear they’ve got their heads all the way up their— Yeah, sorry, I’m here,” Clint said abruptly, and he turned away from Phil to press the phone closer to his ear. Phil knew from experience Clint hated long phone calls thanks to his hearing aids. “No, I’m sure you’re the last— It’s Barton, okay? B-A-R-T-O-N. Number— Yeah, right, that’s the number. Can you double check? Because—” He started pacing out of the room, his head shaking as he moved. “No, I’m telling you, I never got the letter, that’s why I’m calling. ‘Cause unless something changed, I’m pretty sure somebody’s supposed to send me *something*—”

His voice trailed off as he stepped past Phil and into the hallway, and Phil sighed as he heard the

back door bang shut behind. Walking over to the desk revealed that Clint'd spread the mail all over the place—mail Phil sorted carefully, with due dates for bills clearly marked. He shuffled through it all for a moment before stacking it all back up again.

He listened idly to the sound of Clint's voice carrying back into the room—too low for Phil to make out the words, but loud enough to indicate he'd started snapping at the person on the other end—and dug into the bottom drawer of the desk. They only really used the desk during tax season and as a glorified catch-all for various paperwork—bills, updated insurance information, receipts, you name it. Clint's drawer at the bottom consisted mostly of random sheets of paper, forgotten forms from work, and a careful stack of envelopes held together with a rubber band.

Phil flipped back through them, skimming the postmarks.

He reached January, frowned, and carried the stack out toward the back yard.

“And you don't keep track of that shit?” Clint demanded down the phone as Phil stepped outside. He paced back and forth in the yard, Birdie at his heels. “No, the county didn't help me, they forwarded me onto you, 'cause according to their records— I'm not taking a *tone* with you, man, I just need to know where the fuck he is!”

The last word echoed like a shot across the yard. Phil set the envelopes on their small patio table, his stomach clenching as Clint pulled the phone away from his ear. He frowned at the display for a second before he thumbed the *end call* button. “Fucking bureaucrats, it's all fine until the second somebody needs them to—”

Surprise and something darker registered on his face the second he turned around, and Phil watched as his eyes flicked down to the stack of envelopes on the table. He rubbed the back of his neck. “You, uh, figured out I was reading them?” he asked after a couple seconds, not quite meeting Phil's eyes.

“In addition to handling all our mail, I take out the recycling,” he reminded his husband, and Clint snorted as he shook his head. “You haven't heard anything since January?”

Clint shrugged. “It's not a big deal. He's like that, he gives a shit 'til he—”

“Clint.”

Immediately, Clint's whole body clenched up, and Phil grit his teeth. He recognized that clench, saved only for the silent seconds before their biggest blow-up fights. He drew in a breath, ready for whatever anger Clint planned on throwing his way, but then, Clint sighed. His shoulders loosened, his hands dropping to his sides; when he cast his eyes over at Phil, finally, all Phil read in them was worry and fear.

“He writes every month, like clockwork,” he said, closing the distance between them. “Not much new to say about prison, but he tries. Tells me about his GED classes, about card games with the other inmates, new cooks who can't make a Salisbury steak to save their lives, whatever.” He drew close enough that Phil could rest a hand on his back, and instead of flinching away, he slid close. “February, I get nothing. Last month, nothing. This month—”

He shook his head, and Phil frowned. “The prison can't tell you anything?”

Clint snorted. “The prison released him out on parole,” he said. He caught the surprise on Phil's face, too, because he rolled his eyes. “Yeah, just like the prison system, right? Let the guy loose, fuck up the address they're supposed to send the *hey, your brother's out now* letter to, forget how

to track him in the parole system . . . ” He trailed off, but not before he met Phil’s eyes. “Until he checks in with the guy he’s supposed to report to for parole, he’s doing god-knows-what in the wind.”

He glanced back down to the letters, and Phil rubbed his back lightly. For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to forget about all their potential evening plans to toss in a crappy movie and bundle together on the couch.

But Phil knew from Clint’s stories about his brother that no amount of couch-bound cuddling would chase his fear away.

Instead, he leaned in and pressed his nose and lips to Clint’s temple for a moment. “From what you tell me, Barney’s resourceful. He’ll take care of himself.”

Clint sighed. “That’s kind of what I’m afraid of,” he admitted, and leaned in closer.

“Oh my god,” Jessica Drew wheezed, “how do you do this every week?”

“It’s twice a week, and you’re sweating on my bag,” May Parker scolded.

Jessica lifted her head just far enough that the other woman could snatch her gym bag off the locker room bench. After an hour of spin class, she felt like her entire body was drenched in sweat—and worse, like her legs were made of spaghetti. She lifted one off the ground and then had to double-check to make sure it was still attached.

“You’re like—what’s that big triathlon crazy people do?” she asked, thumping her head back against the bench.

“Ironman?”

“Yeah, you’re like the iron *woman*.” May chuckled and started changing out of her gym clothes. “Next time you invite me to work out with you on my spring break, I’m not coming.”

“You invited yourself,” May reminded her. She pulled on her t-shirt and then turned around, hands planted on her hips. “And here, I thought the only work-out you believed in was walking up the stairs at school.”

“I wouldn’t have to do that if Sitwell hadn’t taken my elevator key,” Jessica grumbled.

“I know. Which makes me wonder why you came to an hour-long spin class instead of doing anything else with your break.”

Jessica closed her eyes and sighed. “Would you believe I’m spring-cleaning but with my soul?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

Bruce was grateful that he’d set an alarm on his phone to pick up Natasha from the airport. He’d nodded off in his armchair while catching up on his neglected stack of science journals. Thank goodness for spring break. He ran a hand over his face and fumbled around for his glasses, finding them in his lap. He shrugged on a brown corduroy jacket over a t-shirt and jeans and started up his car.

Natasha had texted him sporadically while in Chicago for a long weekend visit with her father, mostly to confirm that her flights were running on time. He didn't press for more conversation, knowing that she only saw her dad once or twice a year. Bruce was all too familiar with having little to no contact with family, but despite knowing what it was like, he was still at a loss on what to say to her beyond plane arrival confirmations.

When Bruce picked Natasha up, he could immediately see the weariness in her face, and he knew it wasn't entirely from travel. She tossed her suitcase into his hybrid's trunk before sliding into the passenger seat with a sigh. They were halfway through the forty minute drive back to town when she broke the silence.

"Can I stay with you tonight?"

"Of course," he answered. "You okay?" Her only response was to go back to staring out the window of the car and watching the scenery pass them in the dark.

It was after midnight when Bruce pulled his car into the garage. He asked if she wanted her suitcase, but she shook her head. "Can we just go to bed?"

"Yeah," he answered.

Natasha entered the house first, and went straight for his bedroom. Bruce wasn't entirely sure how things were going to play out, so he gave her a bit of space while pouring a couple of glasses of ice water and thumbing through the day's mail. By the time he made it to his room, Natasha was in the adjoining bathroom, brushing her teeth with a finger. There was a trail of clothes on the floor, and Bruce saw she was currently only dressed in underwear and one of his t-shirts.

He sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes before shrugging out of his jacket. Natasha silently moved out of the bathroom and settled on the opposite side of the bed. Bruce took his turn in the bathroom, and when he was finished, Natasha was still sitting on top of the sheets, staring at his dresser but not really seeing anything.

Bruce removed the rest of his clothes—he'd developed the habit of sleeping in the buff in grad school and never bothered to kick it—before turning off the light and crawling beneath the sheets. "You want to talk?" he asked.

Natasha startled at the sound of his voice and looked around the room, noticing perhaps for the first time that it was now completely dark. She situated herself between the covers and curled up against him. Bruce wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Her left hand went to his chest and he was still surprised that someone would want to get that close to him.

Her words bubbled out of her in a quiet tone, but in a language he didn't know. "Natasha," he said in a move that was half calling her name, half a kiss to the top of her head. "English."

"Sorry. Dad doesn't converse in anything except the mother tongue if he doesn't have to." She was quiet enough after apologizing that Bruce wondered if she'd fallen asleep. But then, she sat up and looked down at him. He began to reach for the bedside lamp, but she grabbed his hand. "He's a shell," she told him. "Just this skin of a person who barely exists."

"It can happen when you lose your wife," Bruce reasoned.

"You didn't have a young daughter when Betty died."

"True," he acquiesced.

“My mother knew she was sick when we moved here, but refused to tell anyone. By the time Dad finally convinced her to go to a doctor, the cancer had spread from her lungs to her spine. She was gone three months later.”

Bruce knew bits and pieces of Natasha’s past, but never the full story. Her soft, low voice caused him to want to fall asleep, but he fought it, knowing that it was rare for her to open herself up like this. He didn’t want to miss it.

“Dad sent me away to a gymnastics center four months later, not having a clue on what to do with me,” Natasha continued. “We’ve barely talked since.” She paused to form her words, wrapping her arms around herself. “This is the first time since Alex that I’ve visited him while I’m in a relationship. I always knew how...empty he was, but now—“ She sighed and blew a curl out of her face. “I don’t want to be like that. I could be so very easily. I think I almost was.”

“Most people could if they let themselves,” he honestly responded. It was a thought he’d harbored a number of times himself.

Natasha settled back down by Bruce’s side. “Promise me you won’t let me become what he is.”

“Only if you promise to do the same for me.”

She turned and rested her chin on his shoulder to look at him. “I thought that was Tony’s job,” she said with a smirk.

His stomach flip-flopped at the sight of her little grin, and not for the first time, he wondered how he got so lucky to have her not only in his life but in his bed. “I don’t get naked around Tony.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

Bruce sighed and rolled his eyes. “That was one time and only because otherwise we would’ve both come down with hypothermia.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself to feel better,” Natasha replied while running fingers through his hair.

He caught her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. “You’re not your father,” he reassured.

“Neither are you,” she whispered.

“Jessica,” Monica said, and Jessica froze, a sandwich hanging halfway out of her mouth. “I never want to be the person who says you maybe don’t have a charitable heart, but *maybe*—”

The sound of a power tool cut her off, distracting her, so Jessica returned to her sandwich. A good half of the tray was left after lunch, and as far as she could tell, wasting Habitat for Humanity food was a *big* no-no.

At least, that’s how she was justifying her third free sandwich while everybody else was sawing, hammering, and painting.

Monica twisted back to face her, and she swallowed without tasting her most recent mouthful. Monica *looked* like a construction worker, with her hard hat, tool belt, and jeans. Jessica almost said that, too, but the other woman planted her hands on her hips. “You know that Ororo and I told you ten times that we’d have drinks after and that you didn’t have to come, right?”

“I—”

“And that we made clear that we like you a lot, but coming to the site means you have to help out, yeah?”

Jessica held up a hand. “I know, Monica, but—”

“And we said that we’d make all the time in the world for your drama *after* we were done working for the day, now didn’t we?”

Even though Monica’s tone stayed exactly the same—slightly-annoyed and a little hoarse from shouting at other people on the site—Jessica grit her teeth at her words. “That’s not fair,” she ground out. “I never said—”

“That you have some kind of issue going on that you’re dying for somebody to talk to you about?” Monica finished, and Jessica glanced back down at her paper plate. “You called me up and when I told you I had this, you *volunteered* to help out.”

“Maybe I like charity work?”

“You like not being left alone with your own head right now,” Monica retorted with a shake of her head. “And that’s fine. But let me and Ororo call some of the other girls and take you for a drink tonight. Don’t be miserable here all day.”

Jessica sighed and thumbed at her bread crust. “There’s not a lot of ‘the girls’ to take out lately,” she half-grumbled.

A clatter of two-by-fours on top of each other covered up her words, and Monica frowned. “I missed that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jessica replied, and got up to throw her plate in the trash.

“So,” Bucky’s mom asked, crossing her arms over her chest, “how soon should I expect a grandbaby?”

“Ma, c’mon,” Bucky groaned, and as his sister’s shouts from downstairs echoed up into the kitchen, she smirked at him.

He’d come up just for a couple fresh drinks—beer for him and Steve, because his folks seemed hell-bent on squirreling away the good wine, and some of the crappy alcoholic lemonade Lainey’d cooked up for the sisters—when his mom’d ambushed him in her pajamas, her face amused and a little exasperated all at once. He knew the second he saw her that the noise downstairs was keeping her up.

Not that she seemed to mind.

“It’s just a question,” she said, about as innocent-sounding as somebody with blood on her hands. He rolled his eyes and went back to filling up Tammy and Rebecca’s glasses. “But I’m just wondering, if you’re willing to bring him home to meet the family—”

“You make it sound like I had a choice.”

“—and feed him to the vultures downstairs, it’s a lot more than just messing around with a boy you like.” He felt red creep up the side of his neck, but he refused to look over at her.

She stayed quiet the whole way through him putting the lemonade away before she said, “James.”

He swallowed. “Yeah?”

“Look at me.” When he cast a glance over in her direction, she had her hands planted on her hips and a serious expression plastered all over her face. She rolled her lips together. “How serious are you and this boy?”

“Ma—”

“James Buchanan Barnes, so help me if you proposed without a word to this family, I will—”

“I didn’t *propose*, Jesus!” he squeaked, and he swore the heat in his face might burn him to ashes. “I— My lease is up and once I’m officially out of my apartment, I’m moving into his, but that’s it. I promise.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You know, if you’re living with him but not married, it’s—”

“Yeah, you know what? I think I hear Tammy yelling for her drink,” he interrupted, and his mom, damn her, she *laughed* as he dashed for the stairs down to the basement.

He’d warned Steve about his mom on the drive to the airport. “She’s the greatest woman on the planet, but she’s got an evil streak.”

Steve’d laughed. “You think I’d expect *your* mom to be a quiet little flower?” he’d retorted, and Bucky’d elbowed him in the ribs for that. “Seriously, though, you’ve met my mom. If I’ve survived all these years of her guilt trips and bad blind dates, I can survive ‘Ma Barnes.’”

Bucky’d snorted. “You call her Ma, she’ll never let you leave.”

Steve’s smile was small but it’d made Bucky’s belly twist itself into knots anyway. “Maybe that’s the plan,” he’d replied, and squeezed Bucky’s knee before the light turned green.

“God, what took you so long?” Tammy demanded as he returned to the downstairs table with the drinks. She practically fell backwards off her chair to grab her glass. “We thought you’d been abducted by aliens.”

“Only if they have washboard abs,” Lainey commented.

“If only Steve would show us *his* washboard abs,” Rebecca chimed in.

Steve grinned as he tossed a couple more poker chips into the pot. “Maybe after this next beer,” he offered.

Bucky rolled his eyes at all of them. “For your information,” he said, twisting the cap off Steve’s bottle and handing it over, “I got cornered by Ma upstairs.” Rebecca whistled, and he frowned at her. “What?”

“She’s been trying to get you alone since you guys got here Wednesday,” Lainey said with a shrug. “She figures she can grill you for all the details.”

“Details?” Bucky repeated.

“Yeah, you know, *details*,” Rebecca replied. She folded her hand and tossed it in the discard pile. “I think the church ‘Barnes child wedding’ pool has you getting married before me or Tammy, and she wants to see what her odds are.”

Steve almost choked on his beer. “Please tell me they’re joking,” he said, glancing over at Bucky.

“Steve, honey, you’re playing poker with four of the six Barnes kids at— God, is it already midnight? I’m going to owe Pete *so* many ‘favors.’” Lainey shook her head as she traded out two of her cards for new ones. “Gambling’s in the blood. Plus, I’m pretty sure she was a bookie for all of our high school sports games.”

Steve’s eyes widened in uncertainty, and Bucky nudged him in the arm. “She’s joking,” he promised.

“Yeah, but is Ma?” Rebecca asked, leaning forward on the table. Her face glowed green under her dealer’s visor. “Because the way I see it, she’s looking down her sighs at a very attractive—”

“And physically fit,” Tammy added, waggling her eyebrows at Steve.

“—future son-in-law. She hasn’t had it this good since Robbie.”

Lainey scowled. “What about Pete?” Rebecca cast her eyes down at the tabletop, and Bucky pointedly picked at a hangnail. “Oh, *real* nice, guys. I’ll remember this next time you download a porn virus and need an IT guy.”

“The point,” Tammy interrupted, holding up her hands in the same peacekeeping gesture she’d perfected when they were kids, “is that she’s looking out for you. Both of you, actually.”

“Both of us?” Steve asked. He tossed Bucky a glance, and Bucky shrugged. “I can understand wanting to protect her son—my mom’s the same way—but me, I’m just—”

“A nice guy who deserves better than our heart-breaker brother?” Rebecca suggested. Bucky shot her a look, but she just lifted a shoulder. “A clean-cut all-American boy? The very model of a modern major—”

“We are so cutting you off, honey,” Lainey cut in. She grabbed Rebecca’s glass and emptied it into her own before turning to Steve. “Our mom just likes her kids to be happy,” she explained. “Sometimes, it’s with work, or our guys—and in George’s case, his wife—”

“If she counts as human,” Tammy muttered.

“—or it means making sure that our guys are happy with *us*.” She started gathering up the cards even though they’d never really played the hand. “And if Jamie’s serious about you—”

“Jamie?” Steve asked quietly, and he caught Bucky’s hand and laced their fingers together when Bucky tried to jab him.

“—that makes you one of hers. Weird as that might be.”

“It’s not that weird,” Steve assured her, and Bucky squeezed his hand.

“You’ll think twice about that when you realize the headboard in Jamie’s room is right on the other side of their bedroom wall,” Tammy replied casually, and Bucky swore he could feel the heat of Steve’s blush in his *hand*.

“Do you like me?” Tony Stark asked, squinting into the spring sunlight. “Because I’m pretty sure you don’t like me, which makes me think this is either a practical joke or a murder plot.”

“Shut up, I brought *The Princess Bride* and I know you like it,” Jessica Drew snapped at him

before elbowing her way into his house.

She walked right into the kitchen and started emptying her bags—the movie, microwave popcorn, Coke for Tony and rum to go with the Coke for her. “I have a wife, you know,” Tony’s voice trailed after her, and she rolled her eyes. “I think it might send the wrong message if she comes home to me hanging out with a half-drunk, movie-quoting coworker with a talent for crazy.”

“I know she’s at an art thing with some friends who are in town for the week,” Jessica replied as she threw the bag of popcorn into the microwave.

“Are you tapping my phone?”

“No, I’m texting your wife.” Tony frowned, and she sighed. “Texting. You do it with a phone, sending word-messages instead of—”

“Uh, I know what texting is. I texted before T9 predictive text even existed, and you try saying those words to a college student without them glazing over. But I didn’t know you texted my wife.”

She shrugged. “I text plenty of people,” she retorted. His eyes narrowed even further. “Fine, I was looking for someone who needed something to do today and she told me you were free. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Kind of.” She huffed at him and started digging through cabinets for glasses until he finally said, “To the left of the sink. And that still doesn’t explain why you’ve shown up at my house with snacks, movies, and booze.”

Jessica set the glasses down on the counter *hard*. “Do you want to watch the movie or not?” she demanded.

Tony stepped back from the counter and raised his hands. “On second thought, and to avoid you breaking one of those glasses just to stab me, I’m going to fire up the TV and everything while you —” He flapped a hand at her. “—do whatever.”

“Good call.”

Halfway through the movie, when Jessica stopped paying attention to the plot to shake her ice around in her glass, Tony remarked, “You know, in my experience, you only end up lonely if you’re afraid to tell people you’re lonely. Which, granted, is easier said than done, but.” She glanced over at him, and he shrugged. “Can’t fix it if you won’t admit it’s broken, right?”

She sighed. “Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Carol nuzzled against his neck and placed one last kiss at the corner of his jaw before climbing out of bed. She began the hunt for all her clothes to the sound of James’s heavy sigh.

“You know you can spend the night, right?” he said.

“I know,” she answered, not turning to look at him and wondering where her bra had landed.

“The fact that you don’t—“

“James,” she said, turning back to him while putting on her jeans, “I like *my* bed.”

“As long as I’m not in it, apparently,” he muttered.

Carol ground her jaw. She desperately tried to cling to whatever post-coital buzz she had going?, but it was slipping through her fingers. “Can we not have this discussion? At least not at one in the morning?”

“I’m not sure you’re going to want to have this talk no matter what the clock says,” he shot back with a hint of bitterness in his voice. His eyes were locked on the ceiling, his hands behind his head and his mouth in a tight line.

Carol thought about how just a bit ago that mouth was on her, and how for just a minute it’d let her shut off some of the thoughts in her head. She went back to getting dressed as her stomach began to churn. “I told you, I don’t know how to do this relationship thing. Not very well.”

“There’s a difference between not knowing how to do something and refusing to get better at it. What are we doing, Carol? I mean, I know what I would like to be doing, but where’s your head with all of this? We just gonna keep meeting up at bars, bantering over a game, and coming back here to screw? If that’s all you want—“

“It’s not.”

His laugh was short and bitter. “I find that hard to believe.”

Carol knew she had two options: crawl back into bed and try and make things right or slink out of his apartment with what little dignity she had left. She chose the latter. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She drove for hours, leaving the suburbs and heading downtown to do laps around the city’s bypass. The road ahead of her blurred as she tried to get her thoughts in order. It was a habit she’d picked up as soon as she was old enough to operate a vehicle, and a defense mechanism she’d called on during her time in the military and later on when life got a tad bit overwhelming.

She hadn’t lied when she’d said that she wanted more than just a series of hook-ups, she just didn’t know how to accomplish that.

Carol’s hand unconsciously grabbed her phone from the cup holder, but as she unlocked the screen with her thumb, she had no idea who to call. She honestly wasn’t sure James would pick up. Jessica had gone into radio silence all week, which was another thing Carol knew she needed to confront but couldn’t muster the energy to do so. The thought of calling Tony Stark in the dead of night to bitch him out for setting her up with such a good guy crossed her mind.

But then she’d have to admit the whole good guy thing out loud, and Stark was the last person in the world she wanted to do that to.

Carol unlocked her door at four in the morning, Chewie cried snottily at her for being gone so long while simultaneously trying to wrap himself around her ankles. “Bipolar cat,” she muttered as she scooped him up. “You’re the only one who understands me. And now I’m admitting things like that to my cat. This bodes well for my life.”

She undressed once more and curled up in bed. Despite her argument with James earlier, it wasn’t nearly as comfortable as she hoped. The sheets were cold and the wide mattress seemed to have grown in surface area, making her feel miserably alone. Carol tried to call Chewie to come and curl up with her, but the cat decided that now would be a great time to chase invisible creatures all around the apartment.

Falling asleep was a nightmare. She laid there for an hour listening to Chewie tear his way through every open door he could find to run around like an insane feline. With a sigh, she got out of the bed, changed into running clothes, downed a glass of water, and left her home. It took an hour before the sun gave her enough light to clearly see the sidewalks and where her feet were taking her. She stood in James's driveway for ten minutes debating on knocking, even getting so close as to stand on his stoop, but she couldn't get her hand to make contact with the door.

She turned and ran away and tried her best to ignore the hot tears that stung her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Also, Kate and I are not only in the same time zone at the moment, but in the same room. Thus, we're doing a Q&A tomorrow. Have a question about us or our writing? Put it in [one of our inboxes](#).

Hot Mess Express

Chapter Summary

Relationships of all kinds are messy.

"But why?" Alva half-whined as Darcy checked her booster seat and made sure she couldn't stage a mid-drive jail break. (Wouldn't be the first time.)

"Your mom and dad need some grown-up time alone," Darcy explained. "No kids allowed. That's why we're having a fun day together."

"They want to kiss," George informed his sister sagely.

Henry screwed up his face into a scowl. "They kiss all the time."

"Right, well, now they get to do it without prying eyes," Darcy informed all three of them, and closed the back door of the SUV.

Darcy and Jane had been friends for long enough that Darcy'd started to notice how Thor's injury was wearing Jane down. Oh, Jane tried to hide it—she was the queen of the stiff-upper-lip brave face—but Darcy'd noticed her mind drifting during their over-the-fence conversations and that Jane's absent-minded professor act had kicked up to eleven. Finally, she'd suggested that she steal the kids away for an afternoon and leave the Odinson adults on their own for some much needed couple time.

Jane'd pursed her lips, but Darcy'd immediately noticed how hopeful she'd looked. "You don't have to do that, Darcy. You have enough on your plate, the last thing you need is—"

"A Saturday in front of the DVR while my mom yells at me about wasting my life?" Darcy'd returned, eyebrows raised. Jane'd laughed as she'd leaned her elbows on the fence. "Come on. I'll take them to the indoor foam jungle gym thing and out for dinner. Ice cream if they're good. And you guys can finally figure out how to maneuver around the cast."

Jane'd blushed a little, and Darcy'd cackled. "Fine," she'd agreed, raising her hands, "but you're letting me pay."

"Definitely won't turn that down," Darcy'd replied, and they'd grinned at each other.

The indoor foam jungle gym—called Little Monkeys, a horrible name—was packed with kids when Darcy pulled up, not that it discouraged either of the boys from tearing off their shoes and heading right for the action. The whole thing was like the bastard love child of a McDonald's Play Place and a gymnastics training center, and before Darcy could even shout at them to behave, Henry was diving into a pit of foam blocks. Alva hung back, her fingers digging into Darcy's jeans like she expected Darcy to escape.

Darcy crouched down. "You want to hang with me, or you want to check out the slide?" she asked gently.

Alva frowned at her. "Can you come with me first?"

"Yeah, but only once—all this isn't built for bouncy things." Darcy gestured to her chest, and Alva looked confused for a second before she grinned. They climbed up the weird plastic maze and then zipped down the slide into—you guessed it—another pit of foam pieces. Alva squealed as they landed and shot back up toward the climbing area.

Darcy spent a good five minutes on garment adjustment after she crawled out.

She sat on one of the parent benches as she watched the kids—most the other parents hung out in chatty groups with their drooling babies, but Darcy didn't want to be mistaken as one of them—and tried not to feel antsy. She kept glancing at her phone, waiting for a response to a text she'd sent hours ago. She'd felt like a stupid, lovesick teenager, shooting Loki a text that read *taking the kids out to Monkeys and Applebee's if you want to come* and then waiting nervously for an answer. Especially since the answer never came.

She'd burnt that bridge to the ground, she reminded herself. She deserved the radio silence.

She gathered up the wound-up, red-faced monkeys and steered them out to the car about an hour and a half later, listening to their crazy stories about face-first swan dives (she'd yelled at Henry for that) and meeting other little girls who loved horses (Alva, obviously). Henry tried recreating one of his death-defying jumps on a bench outside Applebee's, too, until Darcy caught him by the back of his t-shirt.

"Your parents will kill me if you kill yourself," Darcy reminded him. He scowled at her and decided to chase his brother into the restaurant, instead.

They were just about to step up to the hostess stand when someone lightly touched the small of Darcy's back. She flinched, ready to whip around and remind whoever it was that you didn't touch women without their permission—until the kids all chorused, "Uncle Loki!"

Loki smiled as the three of them glommed onto him, his hand drifting away from Darcy so he could return the hugs. "I took the liberty of arranging a table," he said. He looked almost apologetic as he smiled at Darcy.

Darcy rested her hands on her hips. "You could have texted."

"I thought I might have a project meeting with a few of the students I TA for, but they cancelled at the last minute." He glanced down at the kids and ruffled Alva's hair. "I thought I'd be a pleasant surprise."

"You're the best surprise," Alva informed her uncle, beaming.

Darcy pursed her lips. "You're pretty okay, as surprises go."

Henry and George both sent her slightly menacing looks. "Uncle Loki's the best," Henry informed her snottily. "If you don't tell him that, then you're mean."

"Henry," Loki warned.

"Does this mean you're coming with us for ice cream?" George asked.

"I never promised ice cream," Darcy pointed out. All three kids looked immediately suspicious. "What?"

"You always buy us ice cream when we go out," Alva observed.

Henry nodded. "Always."

Even Loki smiled. "You did have a fondness for ice cream when we were spending time together," he agreed.

Darcy sighed. "You're lucky you're all pretty cute," she complained, and she pretended that her cheeks didn't warm a little when Loki, the bastard, grinned at her.

Rhodey slid on to the stool next to Tony with a sigh. "For a guy who's so dedicated to AA, you sure do spend a lot of time in bars."

Tony took a sip of the bar's legendary homemade—and alcohol-free—ginger ale with a smile. "I like the little umbrellas." He took a look up and down up Rhodey, taking note of the stubble, wrinkled slacks, and red eyes. "You look like shit."

"Fuck you, too."

Tony raised his hands in defense. "Whoa, there, buddy. What's wrong with you? Last I checked, things were hot and heavy with a leggy blond."

"'Were' being the operative word," Rhodey replied.

Tony felt his brow furrow as his stomach twisted. "What are you talking about?" Rhodey shrugged before ordering a double on the rocks. Tony whistled at the strength of the drink. "Do I get to hear the story, or am I just going to have to annoy you to death with a million questions before you finally open up?"

"Fine," Rhodey sighed before taking a swig of his drink. "I thought things between me and Carol were going great, but I asked her to spend the night—just once—or maybe invite me over to her place."

"Wait," Tony interrupted shaking his head. "Back up. You never went to her place?"

Rhodey shrugged. "I guess she thought I was allergic to her cat, or maybe she's a hoarder, I don't even know."

"Dude, even *I've* been in her place," Tony argued, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized they were not the right ones to say. Rhodey's jaw was so tight he could've broken his teeth. "But maybe I'm not that important, so she doesn't care if I see her messiness or something."

"Whatever," his friend muttered. "Doesn't matter now."

"You broke it off?"

"Feels pretty broken to me," Rhodey answered. "No more blondes," he told Tony while waving a finger in his face.

"I'm sorry," Tony apologized, and he really meant it. He really thought his plan would be amazing, and he'd warned Carol not to fuck things up, but here they all were. "Tell you what," he said while leaning in conspiratorially. "You lay off the booze, I'll let you drive my car."

"Which one?"

"Any of them you want; mi garage es su garage."

Rhodey gave him a dubious look. “This is your equivalent of a pity fuck, isn’t it?”

“What? No,” Tony replied, drawing out the single-syllabled answer for as long as his breath allowed. “Okay, maybe a little, but if it will turn that frown upside down, then let’s do it. I’ll even take you to my super secret country road where I got up to one-forty that one time—don’t ever tell Pepper about that, by the way. I just can’t take any more of your teenage angsty vibe. You’re acting like you could start singing Taylor Swift songs at any moment, and that’s just unacceptable. C’mon.”

Tony threw down money to cover their drinks plus a healthy tip and dragged Rhodey out of the bar by his collar. He drove them back to the house and led Rhodey to the detached garage (not to be confused with the attached garage) that held Tony’s small collection of cars.

“That one,” Rhodey chose while pointing to the small, silver roadster.

“You got it,” Tony replied while tossing his friend the keys.

They spent the next two hours taking turns behind the wheel to leave skid marks on country roads and test how high they could get the speedometer. On the way back, Tony dropped Rhodey off at his car, which they’d left behind at the bar. “You good?” Tony asked. “You can say no. You can come spend the rest of the weekend at the house if you want. I won’t hug you, but I’ll volunteer Pepper to do it. Is it weird to tell another guy that his wife’s chest smashed up against your chest will make you feel better?”

“Please stop talking,” Rhodey groaned. “I’ll see you later.” He paused with one foot of the car. “Thanks for this,” he said softly.

Tony shrugged. “That’s what friends are for.”

“No, I mean, all of it. It may not have ended well, but it was fun while it lasted.”

Pepper found Tony banging around in the garage (the attached one) an hour later. “Do I want to know, or should I just put emergency services on alert?”

Tony shot her a dirty look and gave the hunk of random metal he found one last bang with his oversized hammer before tossing it onto his workbench. “I told her—I fucking told her—I said if she messed with him—“

Pepper made a T with her hands and shook her head as she walked over to him. “Context, please.”

“Carol dumped Rhodey,” he explained.

Pepper’s head tilted to one side like it always did during conversations like this; she did it with their students, too, and Tony recognized the silent warning that he should play both sides fairly.

Not gonna happen.

“Have you talked to Carol?” Pepper asked.

“No.”

“Then how do you know—“

Tony couldn’t fight his eye roll any longer. “My best friend is a mess, and you want me to consult a second party for confirmation? Really?”

“Maybe she’s a mess, too,” Pepper reasoned gently.

“Well, she should be, because she let a great guy—“

“Are you sure it’s her fault?” she questioned.

His jaw audibly clamped shut for a second at that. “Are you really going to pin this on Rhodey?”

“No,” she answered slowly. “I think you’re going to pin it on yourself and take it out on Carol.” He snorted and rolled his eyes again before picking up the hammer once more. “Guess I’ll go send her a warning text now. Please don’t do anything you’ll regret at work on Monday.”

“I’m not the one who should have regrets,” Tony sniped back.

“I’m sure you won’t be,” Pepper muttered.

“You had one fucking job.”

Carol looked up from her laptop to stare at Tony in the doorway. There was not enough coffee in the world to deal with this. It was a Monday, the first day back from spring break, and she’d spent the last two days twisted into a giant knot of worry over her relationship.

She shook her head in confusion. “I already sent you the IEP requirements for when we do the online assessments.”

Tony stalked into the room and closed the door behind him. It was impossible to miss the anger in his eyes—a rare sight unless some dick at a school board meeting was seriously adamant at stripping something artsy from the school budget. “What did I tell you about Rhodey when you started dating?”

“You seemed to brag a lot about yourself and your matchmaking wiles.”

“I told you not to break his heart. And that’s exactly what you did.”

Carol’s got froze into a chunk of ice. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how I had to try and put my best friend back together yesterday because you broke up with him.”

She shook her head. “We didn’t break up, we just had a fight. We’re not broken up.”

Tony’s face slid into a series of emotions—confusion, uncertainty, and something that looked too much like pity for Carol’s comfort. “You sure about that?” he asked before leaving her room.

As soon as he was gone, she dove under her desk for her cell phone. After running to James’s house and stopping short of knocking, she’d spent the next thirty-six hours trying to work up the nerve to talk to him. She was finally able to call him last night, but he didn’t answer. Carol figured he needed space to work through things—at least, that’s what she’d hoped.

She felt sick at the thought of sending James into the kind of hurt Tony spoke of. It hadn’t been her intention; she was just scared. Long-term, serious relationships weren’t her thing. And despite the number of times she may have drunkenly lamented to Jess about how she wasn’t in one of those relationships at the moment, she’d be given a gift horse and then totally looked in its mouth, or whatever that stupid phrase was. The last couple of days had left her sleep-deprived, and coffee was going to be the only she’d make it through today.

But now, things were so much worse.

She called his cell phone once more, but it only rang once before going to voicemail. He was purposefully ignoring her call. The anger of that quickly slipped into sadness. Carol deserved that. She certainly hadn't deserved him, and she knew that but she could've handled things better. Carol just didn't know how.

She opened a new email to send to James, but the bell rang before she could even decide on a greeting. Kids poured into her closet of a classroom a few seconds later, all excited to tell her about their adventures over spring break. She faked smiles and laughs at all the appropriate times and half-listened to their tales while getting them started on some extra math or reading first thing in the morning.

Distracting herself with work, Carol repeated her lesson plans in her mind like they were a life-saving mantra. She focused on what she needed to do for the next eight hours and nothing more; she couldn't risk dipping into the mess of emotions swirling around her. Not here at school, anyway.

When it was time for classes to get started, Carol made sure her students had everything they needed before shooing them off to class. She forgot about Jessica Cage's maternity leave until she saw Wade Wilson beaming at the front of the classroom. Carol swore under her breath as Wade opened his first day of teaching with "I'm not an expert at math, but..." It was going to be a long end of the year if this was how she was going to start every morning.

By the time she mercifully switched her kids over to Barton's classroom, she was already exhausted with the day. Apparently, she wasn't the only one. Even though his teaching didn't necessarily show it, Carol saw tension in Clint's shoulders and face. Once the kids were settled and off to work on their new spelling words for the week, Clint walked over and bumped his shoulder gently against hers. "How was your break?" he asked.

"Fine until the end of it. Yours?"

"Same. Wanna talk about it?"

"Not really. You?"

Clint shook his head. "No. Not yet, anyway."

Carol could feel the words bubbling up in her. She knew the ones she wanted to say, and she knew two people she wanted to say them to, but neither James nor Jess were talking to her at the moment. She'd tried to talk to her best friend yesterday, but had only gotten texts that were short and total blow-offs.

Tony's visit haunted her all day long, and when it was time for the kids to leave, she followed them out to the buses. She walked over to Tony and quietly asked, "He really said we were done?"

The technology teacher grimaced, and Carol wasn't sure if it was because he didn't want to be nice to her or because he'd unintentionally let some cat out of a bag. "Yeah. Did you not think it was over?"

"No," she answered. "We had a fight, a big one, but..." She shook her head.

"It doesn't have to be over," Tony prodded.

"It's probably for the best if it is. You're right; he doesn't deserve to be hurt. And I'm sorry I did

that to him.” She didn’t give him the chance to respond before she walked back into the school building.

“What the hell?” Carol demanded, and Jessica Drew looked up from her stack of second-grade spelling tests.

Second-grade spelling tests were the actual worst. Who decided that little nose-pickers needed to learn to spell anyway? Far as Jessica could tell, the tests only existed to sap her spare time and her morale. If she ever found the asshole who decided that spelling belonged in her curriculum, she would murder him, incorrect spelling intended.

She looked back to her line of red *nope*, *wrong* slash marks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said with a shrug.

“You don’t— Okay, who trained you, Pod Person? Because they should know the real Jessica Drew doesn’t have a giant stick up her ass.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about, but if you think I’m a Pod Person, I can recite my social security number.”

“You don’t know your social security number.”

“Exactly.” Jessica finished up with the test she was on and glanced over at Carol. Her friend loomed in the doorway to her classroom, hands on her hips and an unreadable expression her face. Her hair stuck up out of her ponytail like maybe she’d slept on it wet.

She raised her well-manicured eyebrows. Jessica tipped her head to the side. “What?”

“You’re barely returning my text messages.”

Jessica shrugged. “I’ve been busy.”

“I texted you a dozen times over the weekend, too. I think you responded maybe once.”

“You know how my phone service is. Should’ve just texted my toaster.”

“Funny, since Ororo and Monica said you texted them just fine during spring break—and after.”

Jessica felt her jaw clench. She flipped to the next test and started drawing happy little *you can spell!* smiley faces next to the correct spellings. “I’m allowed to hang out with other people,” she said, cringing when she realized how defensive she sounded.

Carol heard it too, because she snorted. “Sure. And I would have a problem with that if we were seventeen-year-olds who just exchanged BFF lockets, but we’re not, so—”

“Oh, come *on*, Carol,” Jessica snapped. She slammed her pen down and sort of rocketed out of her desk chair. Carol blinked at her like an idiot. “Either regular sex has eaten your brain alive—in which case, I’m just going to buy stock in Duracell and swear off men forever—or you’re really good at playing dumb.”

For a second, Carol just gaped at her. Then, slowly, she rolled her lips together. “If this is about James, you really—”

“It’s not about him, it’s about *you!*” Jessica cut her off. She stabbed a finger in Carol’s direction as she stalked around her desk. Carol’s mouth fell open, and Jessica almost laughed at her stupid fish

face. “You want to talk about BFF lockets? Because how about the one that says ‘BFF until I meet the perfect man, and then screw the girl who buys my drinks every time I run away from a relationship?’ His dick must have some kind of magical properties, because you’ve never ditched me so fast for a guy before.”

Carol’s face, pale at the start of Jessica’s justified rant, started reddening. Jessica knew that flush; she’d seen it every time somebody fucked with one of Carol’s students. “You want to call me a shitty friend, fine,” she said, her voice tight and low. “But then just say it.”

“You think I want to stop there?” Jessica demanded. “I have issues, and I know I have issues, but I *swear* you are the most emotionally constipated basket case I have ever met!” She threw up her hands and started pacing around her room. “You can’t date him because he’s too perfect or his thighs make you drool too much or he *cares* too much, and I cheerlead the shit out of every relationship because I want to see you happy, but apparently my reward for actually encouraging you into something good is that you fucking ignore me. And I’m kind of over that.”

When she whirled back around to face Carol, she noticed that Carol’d rolled her lips together again. Her face was still red, but there was something strange about how she held her jaw and the way she sucked in her next breath. Jessica shook the half-second of worry right out of her head. “I ignored your text messages because I figured they’d end the same way every conversation’s ended since Lieutenant Colonel Perfect Dick walked into the picture: ‘Ha, yeah, okay, meeting James.’” She prided herself on how well she matched Carol’s tone of voice even as she batted her eyelashes. “You want to be with him, fine, but you don’t get to have your endless stream of sex and fun *and* the friend you forget to hang out with, too.”

Her voice reverberated a little through the room, louder than she kind of expected it to be, and back by the doorway, Carol snorted. It was a rough, almost shaky sound, and when she tossed her head, Jessica noticed for the first time that her eyes looked—

Shit, they looked wet.

Well, maybe she deserved that, since all their years of fun spring break plans and weekend DVR marathons had been ruined by James Rhodes and his magical—

“We split up,” Carol said suddenly, and Jessica blinked out of her own head. Carol’s hands balled into fists at her side, her shoulders trembling. All at once, Jessica recognized Carol’s messy hair as her *just broke up, don’t give a fuck* hair, and her dress pants as the super comfy ones she only wore when everything else sucked. Her stomach dropped, but Carol just shook her head. “I fucked it up bad, we fought, he thinks I meant to break it when I just—” She trailed off in a soft sigh. “Forget it. I shouldn’t have come to talk to you, so never mind.”

Jessica scrunched her eyes shut. “Carol—”

“No, I get it. Awful friend, unworthy of your sympathy, whatever.” When Jessica started to cross the room, she held up a hand. “No, Jess, just— Forget it.”

She turned and stalked out of the room, her footfalls echoing down the hallway.

If Jessica threw her pen at the wall hard enough to break it, well, nobody but the janitorial staff needed to know that, okay?

Jasper smiled and waved at Maria as she entered the restaurant. She approached him with a sigh before kissing his cheek. “Sorry I’m late; the babysitter was too busy Snapchatting or whatever to

realize she was supposed to already be at my house.”

“Snapchat?”

Maria rolled her eyes. “Be grateful your students aren’t old enough to have their own cell phones.”

Jasper knew some of his kids did, but only because their parents were divorced, and rarely was it an issue in the classroom. Well, except for the fourth grader in Wanda’s class who’d texted his dad to bring him a different lunch because he didn’t like what his mom had packed him.

“It’s fine,” Jasper reassured her. “Our table should be ready soon.” They spent the time waiting to be seated scooted snugly next to each other while swapping stories about their week. They made plans to sneak off for lunch during the following week’s district-wide meeting for assistant principals.

When their table was ready, Jasper walked Maria to it with his hand on the small of her back. He was grateful his palms weren’t in their typical sweaty state as he did so.

“I’m paying this time,” Maria announced when the hostess left.

Jasper shrugged. “Dinner with a beautiful woman and I don’t have to pay for it? Sounds like a perfect evening to me.” Maria’s cheeks pinked slightly at the compliment. Jasper sighed as he pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. “I hate to mix business with pleasure, but I thought you should know about this.” He unfolded the page torn from a spiral notebook to show a rough drawing of a skull with squid legs coming out of it.

“What is this?” Maria asked.

“I think your boys aren’t that thrilled that we’ve been seeing each other.”

She rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it.”

Jasper shrugged. “It’s not surprising. They’ve spent the last six years getting sent to my office whenever they’re trouble, and now I’m hanging out with their mom. I’d be pissed, too.”

“Doesn’t explain what this is,” she said poking a finger at the piece of paper.

“Apparently, there’s some secret society of evil teachers and principals, and I guess I’m one of their leaders.”

“Oh god,” Maria groaned.

“They call it HYDRA, but I have yet to learn where the name comes from or what it stands for. I didn’t start noticing anything about it until kids started whispering ‘Hail HYDRA’ behind my back as I walked down the halls.”

“Where do they even come up with this stuff?” Maria asked.

“I have no idea,” Jasper answered with a laugh.

“So the boys are involved with this?”

Jasper nodded. “They’re big supporters of the idea of me being a traitor of some sort. They’ve been putting these pictures—” He paused to point at the crude drawing. “—around the school and making flyers about it to pass around the playground during recess.”

Maria shook her head. “I’m pretty sure that doesn’t follow the guidelines for the creative writing assignment Mister Barton gave to them before spring break.”

“I’ve learned never to assume anything about Barton and his class.”

Maria smiled softly, which caused Jasper’s stomach to flip-flop. The waitress came to take their drink orders a moment later. “I’m really sorry,” Maria apologized once they were alone again.

Jasper waved it off. “I’ve had students say a lot of crap about me and my evil ways. Although, I don’t think anyone’s gone so far as to make a logo for me and my henchmen.”

“They are creative little brats, aren’t they?”

“Everything okay with them? I mean, you don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want; I don’t need a lovely date to turn into a parent-teacher conference.”

Maria tucked a strand of hair behind her ear before speaking. “They keep asking if they can start living with their dad, which isn’t anything new. But it’s picked up in intensity the closer they get to sixth grade.”

“Can’t imagine why that would be,” Jasper mumbled.

“I don’t blame them for not wanting to be in the same school as me. Part of me doesn’t want to be in the same building as them.” Her face fell slightly at that. “Does that make me a horrible parent?”

Jasper shook his head. “I’ve met far worse, and I’m sure you have, too.”

“That’s not entirely reassuring,” Maria muttered.

Jasper reached out across the table and took her hand in his. “You’re not a bad mom. Even though they may make you feel that way sometimes, you’re not. I can’t imagine raising two kids on my own, and if I had to, they would wind up being so much worse than your boys.”

Maria snorted. “No kidding.”

They made a pact to not discuss work or evil twins for the remainder of the evening—once Jasper made it clear that she could talk to him about anything, of course. Their topics instead covered everything from favorite books and movies to dream vacation spots. They spent five minutes arguing about whether or not Jasper could leave a tip since Maria was picking up the check, but he finally surrendered and let her cover everything.

He walked her out to her car and was quite pleased when she pulled him in for a kiss. He resisted the urge to deepen it since they were taking things painstakingly slow. Maria broke away with a pleased sigh and ran a hand down his chest. “I can talk to the boys if you want, see if they’ll stop this HYDRA nonsense.”

“Nah,” Jasper replied. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you don’t need another source for arguments at home, and besides,” he said, leaning in conspiratorially, “I make a great patsy.” He quickly kissed her on the cheek before winking and walking away.

“Okay, this looks bad,” Clint said to Phil as he walked in the door from school, and Phil raised both his eyebrows in that skeptical way of his.

Birdie barked, the kind with a low growl in the back of it, and on the couch, Barney groaned.

Barney, in stained clothes that smelled like three weeks of sewer, with a cut lip and a black eye and dried blood on his temple. Barney, who grunted when he tried to stand and greet Phil until Phil waved him off.

“I knew it was bad when you skipped out on school at the middle of lunch,” Phil replied, and Clint cringed internally at that. He’d spent most of the last week digging through the darkest parts of his address book and the white pages, digging out names and numbers he’d forgotten a long time ago. He’d pulled himself up out of the hole he and Barney’d started out in, but Barney—

Old habits died hard.

That’s why, the second his cell phone rang at lunch with news that an old buddy’d spotted Barney at a flop house on the roughest side of town, Clint’d nabbed the keys, scribbled out a note for Phil, and gotten Darcy on the phone with a sub.

He was going to owe so many people coffee in the morning.

Phil lingered in the doorway, toeing off his shoes extra slow, and Clint rubbed a hand over his face. “Natasha drive you home?”

“You owe her a new bottle of that expensive nail topcoat. She promised you’d know what that meant.” Clint rolled his eyes, and on the couch, Barney snorted. Phil tossed him a warning look. “Let me change,” he said, a little tighter than before, “and then we can—talk.”

“I’m not bleeding anymore, and the strongest thing on me is Advil,” Barney suddenly volunteered. They both looked at him for a second, and he shrugged. “I’m just saying. You can have your domestic. I’m not going anywhere ‘til I can stand up without the room spinning.”

“You’re not going anywhere for longer than that,” Clint retorted, and he blinked when he realized that Phil’d said *you’re not going anywhere* at the same time. He whipped his head around to stare at his husband.

Barney chuckled. “Go have your domestic.”

“Two thirds of the time, I hate your guts,” Clint reminded him as he followed Phil out of the room.

“If it’s only two thirds, you’re getting sentimental as fuck in your old age,” Barney returned.

Clint flipped him off over his shoulder.

By the time he herded Birdie—still uncomfortable about the visitor—back into their bedroom with him and Phil, Phil’d stripped out of his work shirt and started on his slacks. Clint closed the door before he walked over and caught Phil by the hips. “Look, bringing him here without explaining, that’s kind of a dick move, but—”

“Where was he?” Phil asked. When Clint shut up, his lips pursed, Phil caught his eyes. “He’s your brother, and I told you we’d find him. But if he comes over here, looking like that, then—”

“A dump on the far side of town,” Clint cut in. He rubbed the side of his neck while Phil watched him. “I guess he found a couple guys he used to run with, surfed their couches and tried to get a job, but all they did was rough him up. He’s broke, he got his ass kicked in the last day or two, I don’t think he’s been near a shower in a week—”

“That much is obvious,” Phil said. His tone was dry enough that it jerked Clint right out of his own thoughts, but when he frowned at him, Phil smiled lightly. “I’m joking,” he said gently, running a

hand down Clint's arm. "Bad timing, but I'm joking."

"I know you are, it's just—" Clint shook his head and stepped away from Phil. "He's a fucking mess, his parole officer's all of five minutes from finding out he's skipped and dragging him in, and I don't know what to do to him. Remember the last time I gave him money?"

"It was before we met," Phil pointed out.

"Yeah, because he used it to buy into that ring of people making fake IDs, and look where that got him." Clint gestured at the door, but Phil just kept watching him, his lips pursed into a tight line. "I don't just want to feed him to the wolves, but what else are we supposed to do with him?"

"Besides letting him stay here?" The question sounded like a whisper, low enough that Clint almost missed it. He blinked at Phil, who shrugged as he closed the distance between them. "When we first met, you told me you didn't talk to your brother. That you were estranged, though I think you used less diplomatic terms." Clint snorted. "But you never lost track of him. You kept his letters, you looked for him when he was missing, you dropped everything to find him because he was in a 'flood hose.'"

Clint rolled his eyes. "Flop house."

"No, I'm pretty sure the note said 'flood hose,'" Phil insisted, and Clint almost laughed at him. He did nudge him, a half-hearted jostle that pressed their bodies a little closer. He felt the tension of the day—driving too fast across town in search of his brother, finding him half-asleep and bloody in an abandoned split-level filled with junkies—start to seep out of him, just from the way Phil stroked fingers along his sides. "He's your brother, and you care about him," Phil pressed, and Clint rolled his lips together. "And even if it's hard to have him here, it can't be as hard as watching the guilt eat you alive when he's picked up for violating his parole—or worse."

Clint nodded a little, his arms slipping around Phil's waist and pinning their bodies together—at least, until his words really sunk in. He leaned back a couple inches, frowning. "You always planned to offer this, didn't you?"

Phil's eyes widened. "What?"

"The letters, me being worried about him, this whole speech. You planned it. You knew I'd hunt him down and you planned to let him stay here the second I found him."

In all the years they'd known each other—as colleagues, as flirty friends, as a dating couple and then as husbands—Phil'd never perfected his *fake innocent* face. He flashed it at Clint, and Clint groaned. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You are the fucking patron saint of lost causes and dog-eared library books," Clint complained, but the second Phil laughed—that full laugh of his, the one that crinkled his laugh lines and warmed his whole face—Clint dragged him close for a long, grateful kiss.

A grateful kiss with wandering hands that only broke when Birdie started pawing at the door.

Clint sighed as they pulled apart and untangled his fingers from the back of Phil's undershirt. "I'm going to owe you for this, you know," he said.

Phil cracked a smile. "And the sex acts I ask for will make Tony blush," he promised, leaving Clint to laugh as he let the dog out—and returned to his hot mess of a brother.

Hard Conversations

Chapter Summary

Not every conversation is filled with banter and laughter. Some days, *none* of them are.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One moment, Bruce's kindergarten classroom was as quiet as it ever got. He let most of the students play on their own for a bit while he pulled kids aside one by one to test them on letters and numbers. The peace was interrupted ten minutes later when George bellowed, "It's not funny!" A mere second later, the boy tackled his classmate, Jacob, to the ground, and it instantly devolved into a wrestling match.

The class was silent save for the grunts from George and Jacob. Bruce sprung from his chair and gently yet firmly pulled the two apart. Once he had the boys on their feet and put some space between them, his gaze bounced back and forth like he was watching a tennis match. "Are you two okay?"

"Fine," they both muttered.

Bruce noted how they each took in a deep breath—undoubtedly to start pointing fingers at each other. Before they could even start with the blame game, Bruce instructed the class that it was DEAR time—Drop Everything and Read. Slowly, the little ones each grabbed a book, most filled with small words or a review of shapes and colors, and went to their individually designated reading spots. Bruce knew all the young ears in the room would still be focused on the upcoming confrontation. In fact, he spotted two students who had yet to realize their books were upside down.

"What happened?" Bruce calmly asked Jacob.

"He started it!"

Bruce shook his head. "I'm not asking about fault, I'm asking about what happened."

"I was just playing with the cars. Brianne and I weren't doing anything wrong. We were just playing and then George yelled and tackled me." The six-year-old ended his tale with wide eyes and an exaggerated shrug.

"He crashed cars together and laughed," George spat. "It's not funny!"

And there it is, Bruce thought. "Jacob, go get your book and read," he instructed.

"Am I in trouble?" the boy asked.

"We'll talk later. I'm going to speak to George first." Bruce watched his student scurry off to hide under a table with a Dr. Seuss book before turning to George. "C'mon," he said as he guided the boy out into the hall. Bruce left the door open to keep aware of his class. He positioned George in

front of the glass window that ran the length of the classroom door it was next to. The bottom half was covered with recent finger paintings and offered George shelter from his classmates. Bruce sat in the open door so he could keep an ear turned toward his class. "What happened?"

"I told you already!" George yelled.

Bruce stuck his hand out between them. "Take a deep breath and use your inside voice, please."

George glared at him, but took a deep breath, counted to ten on his fingers, and exhaled slowly; it was one of the very first things Bruce taught his students every year. "He was laughing."

"About?"

"Cars crashing."

Bruce nodded. "And that's not funny to you, is it? It still hurts." George's bottom lip wavered slightly, and Bruce watched tears begin to fill the boy's eyes. His student took a sudden interest in his shoelaces while he shrugged. "It's okay that it still hurts," Bruce told him. He spent a few seconds debating where to take the conversation before giving in to using his own personal history. "Someone I love was in a car accident, too."

George used his bare forearm to swipe his face dry. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Bruce breathed. "It's really scary to have that happen to you, isn't it?"

The boy frowned. "Henry makes fun of me when I get scared."

Bruce leaned forward to whisper his response like a secret. "I bet he does that because he's scared, too, and he doesn't know how to handle it."

"Was your friend hurt, too?" George asked.

Bruce swallowed, unsure if the truth was worth future traumatizing his student. "She was."

"Did you sign her cast?"

He gave a small smile. "No." Bruce didn't mention that she was too hurt for that sort medical intervention; they can't make casts for internal bleeding.

George's eyes fell as he began to play with his shoelaces again. "Did she ever get better? I mean, was it ever the same again?"

Bruce wanted to scoop the boy up in a hug and protect him forever from the crap life chucked at his too-young students. "She didn't get better, but your dad is, right? You said yesterday during share time that he gets to use crutches now instead of his wheelchair."

George shrugged. "I guess."

"That's really good. I bet that makes life a little easier at home."

"He was pretty happy to sleep in his bed again, he said. But it still takes him a long time to do things. And he can't drive, and we have to get a new work truck. He can't go to work." The boy paused and rolled his lips. "What if we don't have enough money? Parents have to work to make money, and he's not."

Bruce reached over to rest a hand on his student's small shoulder. "You don't need to worry about

that. I'm sure your parents have money saved up that will help. And there's this big-person thing called insurance that will help, too. But you don't need to worry about that." He let the words sink in for a minute before asking his next question. "Do you know who Miss Potts is?"

George nodded. "She's the lady who tells kids their parents are hurt."

"She does more than that. Have you ever been in her office?"

"She let us color in there while we waited to go to the hospital."

"Fun, right?" George just shrugged. "I'm going to ask her to come talk to you, if that's okay."

His face shot back up and his eyes went wide. "Is my dad hurt again?"

"No, George, your dad is fine. It's just that sometimes life gets a little crazy, and it's good for us to talk about it with someone. I think it would do you some good to talk to Miss Potts. And you get the added bonus of coloring while you do it. How does that sound?" A shrug was the only answer Bruce got, but it was better than nothing.

Carol stormed into Clint's classroom. She couldn't remember what exactly brought her here, but something had drawn her out of her room. Her fourth graders were on a field trip, and she'd used the afternoon to prepare for her fifth graders' upcoming transition meeting for middle school.

Maybe it was the thought of her students moving on, or perhaps it was the thought of being in endless meetings. Meetings that would put her across a table from Sitwell's girlfriend. She wasn't necessarily still mad at her vice-principal for landing a girlfriend. She was hateful of everyone in a relationship at the moment, like a good opportunist.

Whatever had set her off—and Carol honestly couldn't name the one thing that had done it—it caused her to shoot off her chair and into the hallway. It wasn't until she was out of her room that she realized an hour had passed since student dismissal. She knew she looked like a crazy person standing in Clint's doorway, and his wide-eyed look only confirmed it.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Carol couldn't control the volume of her voice or the flood of words that spewed out of her. She started her rant with Wade floundering and continued right into her budget getting cut for next year. "Of course, Stark already said he'd donate funds."

"That's good, right?" Clint questioned slowly.

"No," Carol fired back. "I mean, yeah, it's nice of him and all, but good god I'm beyond tired of Tony Stark swooping in to save the day."

Clint tilted his head a little to the left. "I'm sure Stark messing with the budget isn't the only reason you're pissed at him."

Carol's temper flared. "I'm not talking about that."

Clint raised his hands in the air. "Fine by me. I have enough shit on my plate to worry about your mess of a love life."

Carol felt like she was slapped in the face. She knew Clint had something going on at home, but he had yet to spill the beans about what it was. It was yet another reminder of how her closest

relationships were drifting away from her. Before she realized what was happening, hot tears filled her eyes and tried to escape down her cheeks. She ducked her head and angrily swiped at her face.

“Shit,” Clint muttered. “Sorry,” he apologized as he rounded his desk with a box of tissues in hand. “My head’s a mess right not.”

She snorted. “And you don’t even have a uterus to blame.”

“God,” he groaned. “Overshare much?”

Carol couldn’t stop herself. The dam had busted open and everything was falling out of her: all the crap with James, whatever was happening with her best friend, not being able to have her normal share sessions with Clint, not getting to hang out with her usual ring of friends because they included Tony, and the typical end of the year stress. It was all too much and finally brought Carol into a disgusting vortex of hot tears and ugly crying. She sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. She heard Clint mutter another string of curses under his breath before he went back to his desk.

“Get down here now,” he hissed into his phone before pulling up a chair next to Carol. He awkwardly patted her on then head, obviously unsure on how to handle things.

Carol heard footsteps pause in the doorway a moment later followed by the sound of fingers rustling through the air. “Stop it,” she told them, causing the men stop mid-sign. “If you’re going to talk about me, at least do it in a language that I understand.”

They both apologized in unison as Phil took a seat next to them. “You want to talk about it?” the librarian asked hesitantly.

Carol shrugged. “Kind of, but I don’t even know where to start.”

Something started to buzz, and Clint rolled his eyes while pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He swiped through a text and shook his head.

“What now?” Phil asked with a hint of weariness in his voice.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Clint said. The husbands then had a conversation through eyebrows before Phil waved him off.

“I’ll find another ride home, it’s fine. You go deal with that.”

Clint frowned at Carol. “It’s not that I don’t care, it’s just that my brother is being a bit of a shit and I have to clean up his mess.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “You have a brother?”

Clint grimaced in embarrassment before giving Phil a quick peck on the cheek. “Tell her whatever, I’ll see you tonight.”

Carol looked expectantly at Phil, and the other man sighed. “If you’re wanting to be set up, we have a felon sleeping on our couch who’s single.” Before she could ask any of a thousand questions, he waved her quiet. “It’s not my story to tell. He didn’t keep it from you for any other reason than protecting his big brother, I promise.” Phil paused before speaking again. “I was pretty dumb when he and I first met.”

“Well, you did agree to date him,” Carol snarked.

Phil smiled shyly at that. “Took me a year to say ‘yes,’ though. He had to back me into a corner in the library before I agreed. And the whole time during those first few weeks, I was afraid he was going to see me as I was—this lonely, boring man—and leave. And eventually, that thought began to terrify me more than the idea of being with someone.”

Carol turned her gaze to her hands and shook her head. “James won’t even talk to me.”

Phil shrugged. “Maybe it’s been enough time now. And if he still refuses, then he’s an idiot. I mean, he is best friends with Stark, so...”

Carol smiled and sniffed. “Thanks.”

“Clint’s spouses have to look out for each other.”

“You do realize that you’re only in *one* relationship, right?” Bruce asked Tony, and he watched as the other man abruptly stopped guzzling his milkshake.

As a rule, they only attended one AA meeting a week, and aside from illnesses and vacations, they never missed their scheduled afternoon together. That was why Bruce’d frowned when Tony’s sleek red sports car pulled up to the curb outside his house, and why his frown’d turned to a scowl when Tony honked.

“Do you have plans?” Natasha’d asked. Bruce’d tried a new crock pot recipe and invited her over to share it. They’d only just set dishes in the sink.

“No.”

Tony’d honked again, and Natasha’d smirked. “He certainly thinks you do,” she’d observed, and shoed him toward the front door with a well-placed *squeeze*.

He was glad he’d thought to grab his cell phone and keys on his way out the front door, because once Tony’d ushered him into the car and insured that Bruce’d sat down, he’d backed out of the driveway at full speed. The passenger-side door’d slammed shut from momentum, not Bruce’s effort.

“We’re going to a meeting,” Tony’d announced, and that had been that.

The meeting ended just after eight, and the small, quiet crowd had dispersed to their cars or, in Bruce and Tony’s case, to the diner down the street. Tony flopped into the corner of a booth and ordered himself both a giant milkshake and an entire pot of coffee; Bruce, still full from dinner, opted for a green tea. He’d shared some of Tony’s milkshake too, though, mostly because Tony’d poured it into an empty coffee mug on the table and demanded Bruce partake.

Hey, he liked milkshakes. He didn’t mind sharing. He did mind the purposely blank look Tony sent him from across the table and the way he shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said casually.

Bruce sighed. “You’ve spent the last fifteen minutes asking about me and Natasha, but I know you’re not worried about us.” Tony snorted and sipped his drink. “And even if you don’t want it to be, the way you treated Carol the other day is all over the school.”

“I didn’t treat—” Bruce raised an eyebrow, and Tony huffed out a breath like a snotty preteen. “Fine,” he admitted, raising his hands, “I snapped at her a little. But Bruce, when she and Rhodey hooked up, I warned her that breaking his heart was kind of the only unforgivable sin, and then she

goes and—”

“But it’s not your relationship to critique.” Bruce heard the tension in his voice, and Tony confirmed its existence by tilting his head a half inch. He sighed and rubbed his temple. “You want to protect the people you care about,” he explained after a few seconds. “That’s fine. That’s *noble*, though I’m pretty sure no one’s ever coupled that word with your name.”

“You know, you are making a really good case for me taking out a Craigslist ad for less judgmental platonic life partners.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “You care,” he pressed, and Tony stared at his milkshake. “You pretend you’re above it, but we all know the truth, and we appreciate it. But sometimes, the way you show your concern is through trying to micromanage everyone else’s life.”

“Please, really, micromanage?” Tony demanded. Bruce challenged him with a cock of his head, and his friend flopped back against the booth’s plush back. “I’ll admit that my little ‘now kiss’ act with you and Red *maybe* blew up spectacularly—”

“Maybe?”

“—but that’s a little different from Danvers and Rhodey. Because as soon as they actually hooked up, I left them alone. Maybe delivered the shovel talk with extra gusto, but otherwise, I was totally hands-off and—”

“Threw a completely incidental brunch?” Bruce cut in. Tony screwed up his face in a scowl, but he rolled his lips together in a silent admission. “Needled at least one of them for details? Tried to double date with about as much success as your double date with Natasha and I?”

“That’s Red’s fault,” Tony insisted.

“I’m sorry I don’t want my girlfriend to break your arm when she reaches her critical mass of Tony tolerance,” Bruce retorted, and Tony actually released half a laugh. Bruce smiled a little and shook his head. “There’s no shame in believing that people can have happy endings,” he said, resting his elbows on the table. “If losing Betty taught me anything, it’s that faith is a lot harder than cynicism. But you can’t craft other people’s happy endings for them. They need to figure it out on their own—if they figure it out at all.”

Tony nodded a little at that, a quietly thoughtful expression crawling across his face, and when he leaned forward, he poured more milkshake into Bruce’s cup. Bruce chuckled as he drank it, watching Tony carefully.

Finally, Tony sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. “I honestly thought they’d be happy together. All their baggage, it’s kind of a matched set as far as I can tell, and I figured . . . ”

“They might still be,” Bruce suggested. Tony just shrugged.

Natasha was still at Bruce’s after Tony brought him home, her face lit by one dim lamp and the TV as she watched what appeared to be some mystery or spy show on cable. Bruce dumped his keys and phone on the table by the door before he joined her on the couch; she uncurled enough to tuck her feet onto his lap, and he smiled at her as he stroked her ankle. On commercial, she asked, “Stark okay?”

Bruce smiled ruefully. “No one that manic should ever be a romantic.”

She shrugged and turned back to the TV. “They need to come from somewhere,” she said quietly,

and he nodded.

“I expected you to want to speak to Jane, not to me,” Thor Odinson admitted as he sat across from Pepper’s desk.

“I know,” Pepper replied, and smiled.

It was a few days after George’s outburst in Bruce’s classroom that she called his father into her office, holding open doors for him as he maneuvered around on crutches. She’d known Thor long enough to think of him as a large but agile man; seeing him teeter and inch around furniture allowed her tiny glimpses of what his children must have spent the last weeks feeling. Darcy’d fawned over him, calling him “big man” and punching him in the shoulder as he stopped to steal candy off her desk, but then, Pepper knew how much time their receptionist had been spending with at the Odinson household.

“They need distractions,” Darcy’d said the day before, after Pepper’d delivered Alva back to her classroom. They’d spent an hour talking about horses. “I don’t think they’re scarred for life or anything, but Jane does this weird tunnel-vision thing when she’s stressed, and Thor can be a little oblivious.”

Pepper’d frowned. “Oblivious how?”

“He grew up in a stoic family where nobody talked about anything unpleasant. And if you think he’s screwed up from it, you should meet his brother.”

Honestly, Pepper’d figured as much from her meetings with the three Odinson children. George’d skirted around his fears, coloring furiously and scowling at the paper while Pepper slowly coaxed half-hearted answers out of him. He’d shared more with Bruce, but Bruce wasn’t the person who recently told him that his father and hero was in a car accident. Henry’d all but frozen Pepper out, sulking in his chair and calling his siblings “whiny babies.” Alva’d cried when her father’s accident first came up in conversation but then rapidly changed the conversation to horses. “So many horses,” Pepper’d complained that night to Tony.

The jokes he replied with took a dark enough turn that she smacked him with a dish towel.

Now, she sat across her office from Thor, her hands folded on her desk while the man leaned his crutches against the wall. “I thought that you might be the better parent to talk to, given the situation,” she said gently. Thor’s hands paused against the crutches, and he sent her a worried look. “Nothing’s *wrong*, they’re not in trouble and nobody’s been hurt, but—”

“You do not have to sugar coat whatever is wrong for me, Miss Potts,” Thor interrupted with a small smile that didn’t hide his worry. “I have been Henry’s father for long enough to know what kind of antics he participates in.”

She rolled her lips together. “It’s actually not Henry I’m most concerned about,” she admitted. “It’s George.”

Thor’s brow creased in confusion. “George? George’s the most even-tempered of our children.”

“I know,” she agreed, nodding. “I’ve talked to his teacher, Doctor Banner, several times over the last few days, and he said the same thing. But earlier this week, two students were playing with toy cars in front of George, and when they laughed about crashing the cars together, George had an outburst.”

“An outburst?” Thor repeated uncertainly.

“He tackled another boy. No one was hurt,” Pepper stressed when Thor started to shift in his seat, “but he was anxious and upset, and Doctor Banner had to—”

“I have never known Goran to behave that way,” he cut in. The distress in his voice reminded Pepper of Henry’s brush-offs during their conversations, forceful and a little defensive. Pepper smiled slightly, an attempt to defuse his frustration. “He plays roughly with his brother at home, but at school, he has *never*—”

“I know, Mister Odinson,” Pepper finally interrupted, holding up her hands. He relaxed slightly in his seat, his mouth pulling into a tight line. “The fight, if you can call it that, that’s not the issue. George redirected quickly, and when Doctor Banner got him alone, he explained why he tackled the other boy.” She paused for a moment, watching the man across from her. His shoulders were tight and his hands were balled into fists on his thighs. She wondered whether he was angry at George or himself.

She guessed the latter.

“How often do you talk about your accident at home?” she finally asked.

Thor blinked at her. “I don’t understand.”

“Your car accident. Do you and the children talk about what happened? About your recovery?”

The confusion on his expression softened after a few seconds, and he sighed. “No,” he admitted.

Pepper nodded slightly and offered him a slight smile. “I’m not a parent, and even if I was, I wouldn’t be able to tell you what’s best for your children. But after talking to George—and then to Alva and Henry yesterday—I think they’re all still feeling a lot of anxiety about the accident.” Thor looked away almost guiltily. “It’s not your fault,” she stressed, leaning forward. “Kids process events like this differently and at different speeds, and I know they’ve been spending a lot of time with their uncle, grandparents, and Darcy. It’s natural that they’re only just now coming to grips with the seriousness of the situation and how *scared* they are.”

The corner of his mouth quirked. “My brother has promised I am indestructible too many times.”

“All kids feel that way about their fathers, especially boys,” Pepper assured him, and when he lifted his eyes, he was smiling. “I want to keep meeting with the three of them, separately, once a week, just to check in,” she explained, “but I think what might be more important right now is you and your wife sitting down with them and answering their questions. Encourage them to talk about the things that scare them—and that it’s okay to be scared.”

Thor snorted softly. “Henry?” he asked.

Pepper chuckled. “He’s convinced that you can’t be scared after you turn six. I promised him my husband’s still terrified of spiders.”

Thor’s laughter filled her tiny office, and for the first time since the conversation started, she felt her face warm in an actual grin. “I will be sure to remember this the next time Mister Stark complains about a planned PTA activity.”

“Please do,” Pepper replied, laughing.

“Can I, uh, pick your brain? You know, if you’re not busy with disinfecting mats to stop the perpetual pee smell or blowing up things in the kiln or— Why are we looking at me?”

Natasha glanced over at Steve, who shrugged as he stopped tightening the perpetually wobbly leg on the “tall” balance beam. It stood only about a foot and a half off the floor, but a few of the kids panicked every time it shifted, and Natasha’d hoped a little elbow grease might fix it.

James had agreed to do the hard work, and then—citing a team meeting with the other second-graders—he sent his boyfriend.

Natasha didn’t mind the view when Steve rolled up his sleeves and knelt down on the floor, though.

But the view right now was of Wade Wilson, long-term sub for Jessica Cage’s fifth-grade math class. He loomed in the doorway to the gym, his shirt tucked unevenly into his corduroys and his tie both loose and crooked. He looked mostly like a toddler pretending to be an adult.

He shifted nervously and waged a finger between her and Steve. “You know you’re just staring, right? Not talking, or blinking, or pulling faces, you’re just staring, and while I’m usually comfortable with staring, I’m not sure why it involves me.”

Steve sighed quietly. “You were talking.”

Wade blinked. “I was?”

“Asking if you could pick our brains. Metaphorically, I hope.”

“Metaphoric— You know, I told a third-grader I had a brain-picker, once, and he cried for like an hour before I convinced him that I was joking and that nobody was going to shove anything up his nose to scratch his brain.” A half-horrified expression leapt across Steve’s expression, but Wade just waved a hand. “Egyptian unit. That’s how they got the brains out, you know: they broke this weird bone by sticking something in the nasal cavity, and that way, they could—”

“If you break my manual labor, you replace him,” Natasha warned, almost smiling. Wade cracked a little grin at that and finally stepped into the gym, leaving the double doors to glide shut behind him. The gym always looked like a maze during the gymnastics unit—the adjustable vault, various piles of mats, and two balance beams snaked around the room to form activity stations—and he inched around most of the mats until he pulled himself up to sit on the vault.

Steve raised an eyebrow, and Natasha shrugged one shoulder. She waited until he bent back down to ask, “Did you need something?”

“I, uh, yeah, a little,” Wade admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked sheepish, almost embarrassed, and Natasha rested her hands on her hips. “I’d usually bug Barton about this, since he’s my man main in terms of teaching philosophy and talking about *The Hunger Games* and totally mocking Coulson’s reality TV thing. Except I maybe *slightly* misrepresented how well I can deal with the situation, and since telling him means risking him telling Fury and Fury, I don’t know, murdering me slowly—”

“Wade,” Steve said without looking up.

Wade released a long, heavy sigh. “I have no idea how to deal with these kids, like, full time,” he said, and Natasha felt her shoulders soften. “I’ve subbed a *lot*, and I’m not stupid. I mean, I act it sometimes, but I’m *really* not. And the content area’s fine—I can do long division in my sleep, which makes for weird dreams sometimes—but the kids themselves—” He dragged a hand through

his hair before dropping it into his lap. “I really thought my whole ‘nightmare won’t become a nightmare’ theory was right on.”

“Your what?” Steve asked. He kept kneeling on the mat, but he’d stopped fighting with the bolts to listen to Wade.

Wade dismissed the question with a flap of his hand. “The Hill kids wait until the second I look away to stir up some kind of trouble. Different trouble every day, if you’re wondering. Owen Meany—no, wait, not Meany, that’s the name of a book, Owen, uh—”

“Marsden?” Natasha suggested.

“Right, him. He jumps on board every time, turning them into this stupidity acceleration machine that leaves me dragging a desk into the hallway and playing glare-chicken by the time we’re ten minutes into class.”

Steve frowned. “Is that why you’re now keeping a desk in the hallway?”

“Do you want me to get a hernia because I need to move the naughty desk out there two or three times a day?” Wade challenged, and Natasha rolled her lips together to hide her half-smile. “And that class has all of Carol’s kids, too, by the way. Add the crier in my second hour and the girl in the afternoon who constantly just stares at me before saying that I do it wrong and Jones or Cage or whatever her name is this month does it right, and—”

Wade stopped abruptly, his face crumpling into an almost cartoonish frown as his eyes flicked between Natasha and Steve. Natasha almost asked about his sudden silence until she followed his gaze and caught Steve fighting a smile of his own; when she tipped her head at him, he clamped down on the corners of his mouth. His shoulders shook slightly, though, and his bright eyes glowed.

Natasha bit the inside of her cheek to hold back her own grin, and she knew the second she glanced back at Wade that she was losing the battle. “Secrets are no fun and hurt someone,” Wade pointed out. “Especially when you leave a guy with the distinct impression you’re laughing *at* him instead of *with* him.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve immediately said, holding up his hands. “It’s not personal. It’s just— Have you ever been a full-time classroom teacher, Wade? All day, every day, for any longer than a couple weeks during student teaching?”

“Uh,” Wade replied, fidgeting. “Not really. I covered a teacher who was out for two weeks because of kidney stones, once, and somebody who got on a really long jury trial but it was during state testing and she had a student teacher, so he picked up the slack, and—”

“So that’s a no?” Steve interrupted.

“Yeah.”

“Then you need to know that this is part of being a teacher,” Natasha provided. Wade stared at her, and she shrugged. “You don’t walk in on your first day and know everything about classroom management and how to mesh who you are with who your students are, Wade. That takes time and practice. And it’s even harder when you’re replacing another teacher.”

“Especially,” Steve added, “somebody the kids love as much as they love Jessica.”

“You get a honeymoon period,” Natasha continued, “but that’s about it. After that, it’s up to you to

adapt.”

“Or explode in a huge ball of fire and incompetence,” Wade muttered.

“Or that,” Steve agreed seriously, waiting to smile until after Wade burst out laughing.

Wade slid off the vault and was halfway back across the gym before Natasha thought to ask, “What did you misrepresent to Clint, exactly?”

“Wait, who misrepresented what to me?” a voice asked from the doorway, and all three of the teachers currently in the gym whipped around to find Clint and Bucky—*James*, Natasha stubbornly reminded herself—heading in their direction. A quick glance back at Wade revealed that he’d gone ghostly white. Clint grinned. “Come on, you know the rule.”

“Rule?” James asked.

“That the only secrets we’re allowed to keep from Clint are ones involving surprises from Phil or the details of our own sex lives,” Natasha reported. James screwed up his face. “The second one is optional.”

“Depends on how bad I want to see your boyfriend with his shirt off,” Clint confided to the man next to him, and James shuddered. Clint crossed his arms over his chest. “So. Wade’s keeping secrets?”

Natasha pursed her lips, but a few feet away, Wade squared his shoulders. When he drew in a long, slow breath, concern actually flickered across Clint’s expression.

“What I was telling them,” Wade said after exhaling, “is that I like big butts. I know, I know, I shouldn’t tell you, but I cannot lie.”

Natasha smiled and Steve burst out laughing.

And when Wade finally left the gym, you could hear his off-tune singing echoing down the hallway.

Carol stilled her fingers from drumming on the table for third time in as many minutes. She refused to check her watch again and instead started straightening the salt and pepper shakers to line up with the diner menus on the table. She’d gotten James to agree to meet her for lunch. Carol had done her best to make it not feel like most of their dates—this was during the day, not in a bar, and wouldn’t end in them going back to his place.

Not that she would mind if it did, but probably wouldn’t happen.

Her father had always taught her that early was on time and on time was late. The military had only reinforced that notion in her personality. So there she sat at the diner where Bruce and Tony famously met for milkshakes after meetings waiting for James to show. Carol’d half expected to run into her co-workers during her meeting with James. And if it was a chance to show Stark that she wasn’t a totally cold-hearted bitch with his best friend, then so be it. But the men had already left by the time Carol’d arrived.

James walked in, and she gave a little wave. He showed a little half-smile, one full of nerves and hesitancy, and Carol felt her stomach swim. “Hey,” she greeted as he slid into the booth across the table from her.

“Hi,” he returned.

They stumbled their way through polite conversation, catching each other up on the last couple of weeks. He talked about trying to find a graduation gift for his niece, and she shared about how one of her brothers called the day before to tell her she was going to be an aunt for the fifth time. They both danced around the elephant in the room until their lunches arrived. James dug into his, but Carol nudged her chicken salad sandwich to the side and cleared her throat.

“I wasn’t dumping you,” she said. He looked up at her with wide brown eyes and a mouth full of hamburger. “Our fight, or disagreement or whatever, that wasn’t me breaking up with you. That was the last thing I wanted to happen.”

James swallowed and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Carol, I can understand being afraid to commit to something. I’ve been there before, and it’s awful and terrifying, but I thought I gave you enough time...”

“I know,” Carol admitted. “And I’m sorry, I truly I am. I just—” She took a deep breath and forced the words she’d practiced and was still terrified to admit out. “I’ve never been in a relationship that meant as much as this one, and I kind of lost my shit.”

James swiped a fry through ketchup and used the act to buy him time before he spoke again. “Why did you never invite me over to your place?”

Carol could only offer a shrug. “It would be too real. I’d have to admit that I had a boyfriend. And not just any boyfriend, but a really good man. One that I absolutely don’t deserve.” James sighed at that and reached out to rest his hand over hers. She allowed the contact for a moment before withdrawing. “I’m not telling you all of this to make you feel sorry for me, or try and play on your pity. I should’ve told you this earlier. And I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“Thanks,” he said softly.

They went back to quietly eating their lunches as the words they’d shared settled in their minds. When the waitress came by with the check, James grabbed it before Carol could stop him. She offered to pay for her half, but he shook his head. “My treat.”

The awkward silence stretched on before James spoke up. “You’re not the only one who can claim blame. I got screwed over a few years ago—which isn’t your fault, obviously. When we had that fight, I got sucked into the shit from that relationship and just wanted to be done with it.” He paused to look her in the eye. “I’d be willing to give it another shot. Eventually, not just yet.”

“I don’t deserve even that,” Carol told him.

“No, but I’ve spent the last two weeks wondering what you were doing and stopping myself from calling you a dozen times.”

“I know the feeling,” Carol said with a faint hint of a smile. “So what do we do?”

“Be friends,” James answered. “Friends first for a while, and then we’ll see what we can handle.”

Carol nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

Due to SaraNoH's busy schedule, the next update of this story will be May 25, three weeks from today. Sorry to anyone who goes into withdrawals in the meantime.

Testing 1, 2, 3

Chapter Notes

Sorry for making you all wait an extra week for an update. My (Sara's) work schedule got a little crazy.

“Okay, okay, don’t crowd the game master, there are *plenty* of cards for everybody and— Watch it, Red, some of us have delicate toes that can’t take your pointy-for-a-gym-teacher casual shoes.” Natasha rolled her eyes and Tony hopped out of the way—and, deciding that restraint wasn’t really in his best interests, jumped up onto a chair. Bruce, his assistant gaming commissioner, rolled his eyes. Pepper muttered something about Tony falling to his death.

He ignored both of them.

“To the newcomers, the former part-timers, and the uninitiated,” he said while the bartender at Xavier’s glared daggers into the back of his head, “the rules of State Testing Bingo are simple. You pay two bucks into the pot to receive a card, and— Banner, look alive, model one of those bad boys for me, will you?” Bruce sighed as he held up one of the cards, gloriously printed on goldenrod card stock that Tony may or may not have ordered in bulk three years ago. “Limit’s two cards per player, though if I have leftovers, I can be persuaded into handing them out for food or sexual favors.”

“You really don’t want to give him sexual favors,” Pepper warned the crowd.

Jasper laughed, the bastard, and Tony flipped him off. “We play on the honor system, but Darcy has a tendency of hearing about everything that happens, so trust me when I say: you cheat, she and her enormous *talents* will be hunting you down and, I don’t know, shaving your eyebrows off in the dead of night.”

“I’ll swap Nair with your shampoo,” Darcy threatened, toasting the air with her half-empty second beer. Darcy turned loud and hilarious at pay-day happy hours. Tony liked that. He flashed her a thumbs up; she wriggled in her seat and at least three guys (not ones in their group) ogled her not-insignificant, uhm, *personal assets*. “Jasper tried to cheat once,” she continued, “and look what happened to him.”

Jasper ran a hand over his bald head. “I’m sexy and you know it.”

“Did the definition of sexy change when nobody was paying attention?” Clint asked from where he sat with his arm slung on the back of Coulson’s chair.

Coulson grinned, but Jasper just shot him a dirty look. “You had a lot of staff members to choose from, Barton, and you chose poorly. One of these days, you’ll realize the mistake and come crying to me.”

“You know you’re straight, right?” Coulson asked.

“I could make an exception,” Jasper replied with a shrug, and Danvers choked on her beer.

Tony stuck two fingers between his lips and whistled. A good half of their group cringed. Good.

“Look, here’s the point, and then we can get back to the weird mating rituals of assistant principals and—Drew, no swapping cards, you know the rules.” He snapped his fingers at Jessica, who sulked as she returned to her glass of tiny novelty umbrellas (and ostensibly some kind of liquid, but it looked like it was mostly umbrellas). “You mark off squares on your game card as things occur. So, for instance—” He bent down to grab a card from Bruce, the chair teetering dangerously. “—if Wilson loses a kid—top left-most corner on this card—you mark it.”

Wilson lit up like a Christmas tree. “I’ve made it as a teacher if I’m on the game card!”

“Please, Carol’s got at least four squares with her name on them,” Darcy scoffed, and the guy’s face fell.

Tony rolled his eyes at all of them. Collectively. “First to a row of five wins half the pot. Second wins two-thirds of what’s left. Third wins the remainder. Sort of a funky tiered situation, I don’t know, Bruce does the math.”

“With good reason,” Bruce muttered. Tony ruffled his hair before he jumped down off the chair, and everybody pretended like they didn’t notice Natasha grinning about that.

The group devolved into their normal chatter after that—because state testing always sucked, but the game sort of helped mellow people out, or so Tony’d theorized this past week as he sat down in front of the computer to make the cards for the third year in the row—as Tony sipped his ginger ale and helped Bruce count the money. Well, okay, he *watched* Bruce, and also flipped through the last couple cards, just to see what options remained.

Barnes stopped by after a trip up to the bar for a fresh beer. Tony considered pointing out the not-subtle hickey peeking out from his loosened collar, but he decided to be a good sport. Especially since Barnes grinned at him like some kind of preening jungle cat. “I didn’t make the cut, did I?” he asked.

Tony shrugged. “I tried to fit in a square for *Rogers and Barnes screw during a fifteen-minute break*, but Pep gets a little weird about the really personal squares—”

“Leave me out of this,” Pepper said before falling flawlessly back into her conversation with Munroe and Maximoff.

“—so I skipped it.” Barnes laughed and sipped his beer, and Tony narrowed his eyes. “You’re really sticking around?”

Barnes blinked at him. “You’re surprised by that?”

“Well, you did join a staff full of recovering alcoholics, married queers, married straights, a sociopathic special education teacher—”

“You keep it up and ‘Stark gets cut’ is going to be my free space,” Danvers threatened as she walked past.

“—and the head of an evil secret organization. I mean, a weaker man would’ve run screaming.”

“A secret organization?” Steve asked, stepping up to the table. For a second, he looked ready to sling a proprietary arm around his boyfriend’s waist. “Did I miss that prank?”

“Not prank,” Tony corrected, pointing a finger at him. “Overthrow. Or something. I missed the details, I just know that a clump of fifth graders are really into learning how to photoshop Sitwell’s yearbook photo onto octopuses.”

“Octopi,” Bruce chimed in.

“Platonic life-partner, I love you for your brain, but not right now,” Tony informed him, but when he glanced back at the Rogers-and-Barnes contingent, Steve was scowling. “What? Something I said? Fear of octopuses-or-pi?”

“No,” Steve answered with a tiny shake of his head, “I just had a suspiciously high percentage of kids ask if they could do their animal art projects on sea creatures, and now I think I know why.”

Barnes snickered audibly. “*That* needs to be a square on the game card,” he declared before entering into a cutesy wink-wink, nudge-nudge moment with Steve.

“You keep it up, and ‘Rogers proposes through a scantron’ might make it next year,” Tony threatened, and he left them blinking at him so he could go show Danvers just how many times she appeared on the various game cards.

“Miss Potts showed me on the computer,” Alva explained as she combed her stuffed horse’s mane, her eyes focused on the toy rather than across the table at her father. “Some horses run away or stay put, but lots of them do a—friget?”

“Fidget?” Thor suggested, smiling at her.

She nodded. “Miss Potts said it’s like when you dance because you really need to go to the potty,” she added, and stole a glance at him.

Despite Thor’s best efforts, leaving the house still felt like a gargantuan task on his best days, and his original plan—Loki driving he and Alva out to the stables so he could talk about his injury with his daughter—fell through the cracks. But he could handle a tea party with several of her favorite toys—and, by her request, “real tea like Uncle Loki makes, with the mint.”

Alva poked at her tea cup, and Thor adjusted his position on the too-small plastic chair. “Alva,” he said softly, and she raised her head. “Horses show fear through running away or fidgeting because they cannot talk about their fear. They can’t ask anyone about the bad things that happen around them, or go to their parents for hugs. Do you understand that?”

She pressed her lips together hesitantly before she nodded. “Miss Potts said the people who stay with the horses have to know if they’re scared,” she said quietly. “To help them.”

“Right.” Thor leaned forward. “And although you are not a horse, I will help you and take care of you. For as long as I am here, which will be a very, very long time. You never need to keep your questions from yourself, or run away like a horse might.”

The barest hint of a grin crawled across Alva’s face. “If I was a horse, what kind would I be?” she asked.

Thor laughed. “Is there a horse that’s both beautiful and smart?”

Her brow furrowed in thought. “I don’t know,” she admitted, “but we should ask Grandma the next time she comes over.”

He grinned. “We can do that.”

Carol only looked up from her mountain of paperwork when a large bottle was slammed onto her

desk. Said bottle was an empty, plastic tempera paint bottle that the teachers of younger students always had stocked in their classrooms for finger painting. A neon red post-it was fixed to the front of the container: *Pretend this is booze.*

“What are you doing?” Carol asked.

Jessica shrugged. “I can’t bring actual alcohol onto school grounds.”

Carol smirked at the empty bottle. “You scare away all your new drinking buddies?”

“To be fair, they should’ve known better than getting sucked into my web of crazy in the first place.”

“True,” Carol countered. “I’d love to tonight but—“

Jessica rolled her eyes. “There’s always going to be work, Carol. It’s margarita night at La Mesa. Let’s drink and eat our weight in fish tacos.”

Carol looked back down at her desk. Her most pressing need was to double-check all her paperwork and students’ modifications before state testing started up. In every faculty meeting the staff had regarding the topic, it was pointed out time and time again how most of the common teacher infractions were actually done by special education staff. And the last thing Carol needed was for some stupid slip up to happen and cause her to spend three hours in the capital trying not to fall asleep during some training.

But this wasn’t her first rodeo, and deep down Carol knew she was using it as a distraction. Besides, if Jess was willing to make an offer an invitation for girl time, she’d better say yes. The consequences could be so awful that Carol didn’t really want to stop and think about them.

“Fine,” she sighed. “But you’re buying the first round.”

Three hours later, they met up at the hole-in-the-wall restaurant. The proprietor’d moved to the States two decades ago, and his food was some of the most authentic and delicious in town. But his margaritas were to die for; Carol was pretty sure he mixed in a little crack with the salt that lined the rim of the glasses. They were amazing enough to overlook the owner’s perpetual—and sometimes obnoxious—flirting.

“So, what’s new?” Carol asked.

“Fury released the posting for Bucky’s job, so I’m already getting harassing emails from people who’ve figured out I’m lead for the grade about how to get an in.”

“I’m going to need a complete list of items you’ve asked them to bribe you with.”

Jess put on her best innocent face, which required a ton of acting. “Would I do something like that?”

Carol snorted into her drink. “Any promising prospects?”

“The Parker kid applied. I don’t think I would kill him within two months, so he has that going for him,” Jess answered.

Carol nodded in agreement as she dug into her first taco. After moaning at the deliciousness in her mouth and ignoring Jess’s comment of how she needed to keep it down and not be so embarrassing, Carol asked, “Do you think this is the year May finally retires?”

Jess shrugged. “She would’ve had to tell the board already, but she certainly isn’t telling the rest of us. I think her job would be posted on the district’s website if she’d decided.”

“God knows Tony has a betting pool going for it.”

“What doesn’t Tony have a betting pool on?” Jess questioned. “If we hire her nephew, maybe she’d want to spend a year working side-by-side with him.”

“Or humiliating the shit out of him,” Carol countered.

Jess’s grin went wide at that. “I wouldn’t have a problem at all if that happened.” Her friend munched on her own dinner for a minute before asking, “So, what’s up with Dark Chocolate?”

Carol sighed before taking another sip of her drink. She focused on the way the tequila caused her cheeks to flush for a minute before answering her friend’s question. “We’re trying the friend thing out for now.”

Jess quirked her eyebrows. “You sound super thrilled about that.”

“I don’t know,” Carol replied, her hands moving in the air to show her exasperation. “I want to get closer, but he seems more walled off than ever. And yeah, I’m fantastic at screwing shit up, but at least I’m trying to be better.” Her words trailed off as she poked at her lone remaining taco.

“And?” Jess prompted.

Carol’s lips pursed together. “It’s like he won’t share his baggage until he knows every single detail of mine. Which I get—“

Jess started waving so furiously in the air, Carol was initially concerned the other woman was choking. “Nope. No, no, no, no, no. Granted, I think we can all agree that I could never be labeled as a ‘relationship expert’—”

“No shit,” Carol muttered.

“—but that is crap,” Jess continued. “I can understand some degree of ‘I’ll show you mind if you show me yours,’ but demanding you strip down to nothing while he wears seventeen layers of clothes is dumb.”

Carol opened her mouth to argue that it wasn’t completely like that, but Jess just balled up her napkin and threw it at her.

The rest of the dinner was spent discussing safe topics: summer plans, how increasingly insane their students were behaving, and the ultimate ongoing debate of which teacher had the best ass. While they calculated tips and signed their bills, Carol quietly asked, “We’re okay, right?”

“Of course, you idiot,” Jess responded, letting at least one of the knots between Carol’s shoulders relax and unfurl.

After Carol drove home, she crawled into her bed and picked up her cell phone. She opened her text conversations and was a little put out that she had to scroll down to find her intended target. Opening up the series of messages with James, her thumbs hovered over the keyboard. She tried a dozen different things to say, but none of them sounded right. Instead, she double-checked to make sure her alarm was set for the morning and went to sleep.

"I don't want to talk about it!" Henry shouted, and Thor gritted his teeth to hold back his temper.

He kicked the soccer ball hard enough that it shot past Thor and hit the fence with a resounding thud, his face red and angry. Thor—leaning on his crutches and regretting his offer to serve as a stationary goal keeper—watched as his son stalked in a tight, frustrated circle, released a growling shout, and then immediately strode away from their makeshift soccer field. When he threw himself down onto the bench next to the fire pit, he crossed his arms and glared at the ground. Thor sighed as he tucked his crutches under his arms and, haltingly, crossed the yard.

"I don't want to talk!" Henry announced as he grew closer, his chin nearly tucked against his chest. "Miss Potts wants me to talk and Mister Barnes wants me to talk and I don't want to talk to anybody about it! You're not dead and you're barely hurt and it's *not* important anymore."

He kicked the fire pit hard enough that a loose brick rattled. Thor lowered himself slowly into the seat next to his son; the boy immediately scooted over to leave space between them.

"Talking about your feelings doesn't make you weak," he said quietly.

"I'm not weak," Henry muttered.

"Did I say that? No." The boy tightened his grip on his arms, his face still tilted toward the grass. Thor sighed again. "Growing up, I always believed your grandfather—my father—was the strongest man I knew. I wanted to be just like him. But because I never saw your grandfather weak, never saw him sad or frightened, hurt or sick, I thought he never experienced those things. And for a long time, I thought if I could hide those feelings, I'd be as strong as him."

Henry scraped the toe of his sneaker against the fire pit. "Did it work?"

"No." The boy snorted, and Thor reached down to touch his chin. When he finally raised his head, his cheeks were wet. Thor's heart ached as he brushed the tears away. "Do you still think I'm strong?"

"What?"

"Even after I was hurt, do you still think I'm strong?" Henry swallowed, but he nodded. "Do you still want to be strong?" Henry nodded again. "Then know this: being strong isn't a matter of never hurting or never fearing. Being strong means that you hurt or you fear, but you keep going anyway."

Henry stared at him for a long moment. "Did you learn that from grandpa?" he asked.

"No," Thor answered, "I learned it from your mother."

"The hell have you been?" Clint demanded as Barney wandered into the house, and his brother rolled his eyes.

Clint felt his jaw clench, hard and dangerous, and across the living room, Phil sent him a look that suggested he maybe shouldn't lose his temper all over the place. Birdie barked and jumped around Barney's ankles, her butt wagging as she encouraged him to pet him; the little traitor'd decided she liked the bastard, and she never felt bad about showing it. Barney kicked off his shoes, scratched the dog behind the ear, and wandered toward the kitchen.

Clint grit his teeth.

He'd convinced Barney to do the right thing—call into his parole officer, apologize for falling behind on all his reporting stuff, meet with the guy—and surprise of all surprises, Barney'd done it. He'd moaned about having to pee in a cup the whole way to the courthouse, but he'd gone, and he'd thanked Clint for the ride like a mature adult. “Shouldn't be more than an hour,” he'd said after he climbed out of the car. “Just swing back, pick me up.”

“I can wait,” Clint'd offered.

Barney'd waved him off. “No reason you should waste your time. Run back to the school for whatever teachers do once the kids leave or whatever, just be back in an hour.”

So Clint'd doubled back and helped sort some of the crap for state testing, pleased that his brother'd finally climbed up off the couch and acted like an adult.

And then, Barney hadn't been there for Clint to pick him up.

Barney twisted the top off a beer bottle, and Clint curled his hands into fists without really thinking about it. “You're having a beer.”

Barney shrugged. “You told me to help myself.”

“I waited for an extra hour, but you never showed. I even went in, talked to security, and they said you signed out of the parole office all of ten minutes after I dropped you off—”

“My P.O. left early, some kind of family thing,” Barney cut in. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “What'd you want me to do, sit around and wait for you? Nobody's got time for that.”

“And you didn't call?” Clint pressed. Barney shrugged again, wandering back into the living room with Birdie on his heels. “The courthouse has payphones, you could've borrowed somebody's cell, and since you knew I was at school—”

Barney snorted then, breaking in again with a rough, bitter sound. Clint pushed his lips together to keep from snapping at him, but his brother—always the charmer—just offered him a lazy little smile. “You trying to make up for all those years our pops was an asshole by being my dad? Because I'm still older than you, and it's *still* not gonna work.”

On the couch, his face tipped down toward some magazine article, Phil pursed his lips into a tight line. Clint's jaw clenched again, harder than before. Barney just smirked as he sipped his beer.

“You should've stayed in prison,” Clint spat, and then he turned on his heel and shoved right out the front door.

It was already dark out, nice and cool in that crisp spring sort of way, and he dragged his hand through his hair as he paced right out to the sidewalk and started heading down the block. All the years they hadn't talked, all the years where Barney'd done everything in his power to put a big giant hole between them—the drugs, the crime, the bad company, the worse decisions—and he'd still tried to look out for his brother, treat him like a down-on-his-luck guy who just needed that one more chance to make good. Clint'd been that kid, too, a hot mess with a short fuse who a teacher'd seen the potential in. Barney'd never had that, but Clint wanted to be that guy, to show him that maybe life didn't have to be one flop house and shit storm after another.

Then Barney'd gotten locked up, and they'd written every month like clockwork.

And now, a couple months out, he was pulling the same shit: disappearing, keeping secrets, throwing out sharp one-liners instead of just coming clean. Instead of trusting the only family

Barney had, Phil not included.

Standing on the corner, Clint wondered if maybe leaving Barney alone with Phil counted as a bad idea.

But he needed the fresh air to help unwind the coil of anger deep in his gut, so he kept on walking.

By the time he made it back from his trip around the block, Phil was waiting for him out on the front stoop, his back against the front door and his arms crossed. “Don’t say it,” Clint greeted, holding up his hands. “I went off like a kid, and shouldn’t’ve run for it like that. I know.”

Phil smiled, just a tiny press of his lips that touched the corners of his eyes. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, but I’d know your *that was a bad call* face even after a blow to the head.” Clint flopped back against the door and scrubbed a hand over his face, his shoulder bumping Phil’s. “He spends his first couple weeks here on the couch, doing nothing. Then he disappears after he finally starts following the rules and expects me to smile and nod. It’s not going to happen.”

“Did you consider asking him where he was?”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Did you miss the part where I did that?”

“I must have, because I remember you starting the conversation at angry and letting it devolve from there.” When Clint sighed, Phil pressed their shoulders together and offered him a softer smile than the one when Clint’d first walked up. “You want to help him, maybe even protect him from himself. But you can’t do that if you let him needle you. It’s a classic sibling move.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I can imagine you doing that to your sisters.”

“No, I stuck with hair-pulling. And you could try that with Barney, but your results might vary.” Clint shook his head, but it came with a snorted laugh he couldn’t really help. Phil grinned at him. “Try words. And then, if he’s still evasive, I won’t intervene as you, I don’t know, slap-fight.”

“God, you really are one of the girls, aren’t you?”

“My years of manicures gives me something in common with Stark, so it’s handier than you’d think,” Phil replied, and Clint laughed long and hard before kissing him on the corner of the mouth and heading inside to (maybe) face his brother.

“But Mom just sits in a room with books,” George said, and Thor nearly choked on a mouthful of milkshake. “Does she really get money from sitting?”

Thor hid his smile behind his napkin and discretely wiped chocolate from his lips. “Please never say that in front of your mother.”

His son tipped his head in confusion. “Why?”

“Because she will find a way to make both our lives very unpleasant.”

George frowned at that, but he also nodded, turning back to his milkshake with increased interest. Thor’d never actually created milkshakes from scratch before—he usually bought them at the drive through with three children crowing in the background—but George’d requested chocolate-chip milkshakes for their conversation, and after a fight with both the iPad and the blender, Thor’d fulfilled his promise. He sips his own shake as his son stirs his, fidgeting nervously in his chair at

the kitchen table. “Doctor Banner’s friend got hurt like you did,” he said after a moment.

Thor set his glass down. “He did?”

“She was a lady. Doctor Banner said—” George’s forehead tightened, his entire face creasing as he stared at his cup. He looked remarkably like his mother. “She never got better.”

“I didn’t know that about your teacher,” Thor admitted quietly.

“And I know you’re better, but— But what if more bad things happen?” The boy’s head snapped up, his eyes wide in confusion and fear. “What if your leg isn’t fixed and it gets worse? Or you can never go to work again? Or if it rains and there’s another big truck and—”

His voice shook with immediate, almost overwhelming panic, his bottom lip trembling. When Thor opened an arm to him, he climbed off his chair and onto Thor’s good thigh; Thor hugged him close without a second thought. He clung like a toddler, arms around Thor’s neck and his face hidden in Thor’s t-shirt, and Thor pressed his nose to his son’s hair.

“These are not things you need to worry about,” he whispered against the boy’s ear, rocking him gently. “What happened to your teacher’s friend is different from what happened to me. I am here, I am well, and you are not going to get rid of me that easily.” George sniffled softly, and Thor stroked a hand down his back. “It’s not your job to take care of us.”

George drew in a stuttering breath before he pulled away, nodding. “But what if Mom doesn’t really make money at her job?” he asked cautiously.

Thor laughed. “I *assure* you that she does,” he replied, and ruffled his son’s hair.

Steve cracked an eye open to look at the clock on the nightstand. He still had ten minutes before the alarm sounded. There wasn’t much of a point of trying to sleep anymore, especially since he and Bucky’d had an early bedtime the night before and he’d gotten plenty of sleep.

The “plenty of sleep” wasn’t necessarily due to going to bed early, but rather the reason why they’d skipped a night of lounging on the couch watching TV.

Sex. The reason was sex.

Steve longed to stretch out a few kinks in his muscled limbs, but Bucky was plastered along his back. Any movement Steve made would wake his guy, and judging from the way Bucky was snoring, he needed all his sleep.

Testing week was never fun for any of the teachers, but the specials teachers (save Tony) usually had it slightly easier than the traditional classroom teachers. Their job was to coordinate with special education teachers to serve as scribes or readers, and they also bounced from room to room to give the teachers who were giving pencil-and-paper tests a bathroom break.

Bucky, on the other hand, was having a week from hell. Spring allergies were giving him intermittent headaches (and also caused the snoring, not that Steve was going to point that out or anything). One of the kids in his class had been so intent on not missing school during testing week that he’d ended up getting sick all over his testing booklet. And then someone—Steve suspected a vengeful sister—had let loose that Steve and Bucky were more than just spending a few nights together, but rather full-on living together. That had erupted into a two-hour phone conversation between Bucky and his Ma a couple nights ago.

It may not have been mandatory for Steve to give his boyfriend a blowjob, but it calmed Bucky down, and Steve liked him when he wasn't pacing the floors and yelling about anything and everything.

Steve initially sent a silent prayer at the memory that he would be able to keep his good knees until his old age, and then, he stopped and stilled at how naturally that thought—the idea that he and Bucky would be together well into the future—had come to him.

It was a notion that had teased the edge of Steve's consciousness for a while, longer than he would care to admit out loud, but he was just now fully entertaining the idea. He'd invited Bucky into his home and was willing to make a life with him. And not just for the present, but Steve knew it was also for the future—the far future.

He'd toyed with the idea of proposing, but then remembered that he and Bucky were still just a bit shy of a six-month anniversary, and the idea seemed ridiculous. Hell, even Clint and Phil hadn't moved that fast.

But then Steve listened to Bucky breathing, and he *knew* the sound of it, the rhythm and the noise of it. And he knew deep in soul that he never wanted to feel anyone else's breath on the back of his neck.

Steve only really entertained these thoughts at times like this, before the alarm went off and the day officially started. This time of day felt safe for his daydreams. But then, the alarm sounded and it was back to pragmatic, cautious reality.

Thankfully, that kind of reality included things like shared showers (with the flimsy excuse of saving water), brushes and touches while getting dressed and making breakfast, and comfortably quiet rides to school. They always kissed in the car before walking into the school building, claiming that today would be the day they kept their hands off of each other until they came back to the car. They had yet to stay true to their word.

Steve spent the hours of the day wandering the halls of the school, giving other teachers ten-minute breaks, and standing in eerily quiet classrooms. The kids didn't need entertaining; they were busy answering their multiple choice or open response questions. The quiet caused Steve's mind to wander back to its early morning thoughts. Steve looked at the faces of his young students and picked out the ones whose siblings he'd previously taught.

Large families weren't something Steve's mind considered often. His dad died when he was little, and it was always just him and his mom. There were cousins, but they were far away and Steve'd only met them twice.

But then Bucky'd dragged him to New Jersey for spring break, and all the noise and people under one roof had of course been a little intimidating—yet it was also comforting. And since the trip, ideas had begun to float through Steve's head. Ideas that involved family and—as terrifying as it was to admit—kids.

He'd felt the words stick in his throat the two times he'd been willing to bring it up, mostly because he didn't know how. He was awful at serious conversations anyway, and to start one on this particular topic would inevitably leave him a tongue-tied, stammering fool.

But it was something he wanted.

He just wasn't ready to admit it, not yet.

At the end of the day, Steve wound his way back to Bucky's classroom. He could tell by how close the other man's shoulders were to his ears that it had been another long day. Steve walked up behind him and slipped his arms around Bucky's waist. The other man sighed and sank back against Steve's chest. "Let's go home," he suggested.

"I could still do about million things in here," Bucky responded.

"But none of it needs done tonight. C'mon, I'll take a turn cooking dinner."

Bucky turned and gave Steve a skeptical look. "Last time you did that, the fire alarm went off three times."

Steve leaned in for a quick kiss. "Then maybe someone needs to have less distracting hands."

"You are too strong and good and brave for me, Jane Foster."

Jane glanced up from the thick science journal on her lap as Thor lowered himself onto the bench beside her, surprise etched on her features. "The kids—"

"Are asleep," he promised, brushing hair out of her face. She sighed and rested her cheek against his fingers, her eyes fluttering shut. "I have put you all through hell," he said quietly, "and worse? I assumed that because all of you, together, are my rock, we could weather this storm without ever talking about it. I was wrong."

Jane's eyes burst open. "Thor—"

"I never give you enough credit," he said, and he watched her expression—surprised and a bit frightened, but so open and beautiful—in the shadow from the firelight. "I never thank you loudly enough, I never find enough ways to show you how much I need you, I never—" His voice caught in the back of his throat, and he shook his head. "I didn't ask how you felt about the accident, or how your heart fared. I should have. For the children, too, but especially for you."

Jane shook her head abruptly, a jerky movement that hardly hid the tremor in her breath and voice. "Don't. You're fine, you're here, we don't need to talk about it. As long as you're okay, with us, that's all—"

"I will do whatever is in my power to stay here, Jane," he broke in when her voice began to trail off. He cupped her neck, and she melted into his touch. "And if I am forced to leave, it will be with a fight. Because in a storm, a man needs a rock, and that will always be you."

She rolled her eyes, glimmering wet in the fire light, and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "You talk like something out of legend," she chided, but her voice was warm.

"You deserve at least that," he replied, and kissed the top of her head.

The state testing window always brought a fair amount of tension to the Stark household. It was the one time of the year Tony and Pepper worked closely together at the school, and it was the one time of the year where they fought like no other.

Tony's lab was used to administer the state tests, and Pepper was in charge of all standardized testing for the elementary school. They bickered about seating arrangements (alphabetical order or some cock-eyed system that only Tony understood), how far the computers should be spaced ("Pepper, I have spent years maximizing the efficiency of the layout of this lab, the state can go

suck a dick.”), forms of motivation to keep the students interested in doing well on their test (“Tony, we’re not buying movie tickets for every student in the school.”), and just about everything in between. And that was just at work.

At home there were the fights about everything else: appropriateness of squares on Tony’s ridiculous state testing bingo (“Putting Carol on there so many times shows that I’m *not* pissed that she trampled my bestie’s heart.”). Or how the pressure of all the rules and regulations designed by the state’s education department made Pepper want nothing but farm food (“Pep, I cannot eat another meal involving bacon and eggs. My heart will explode into tiny, grease-and-lard-covered pieces.”).

By Wednesday, Pepper resorted to hiding in the guest bathroom with a bottle of wine, a shit ton of candles, and a white noise machine. Tony holed himself up in the garage; he saved car maintenance duties for this time of the year so he had something to preoccupy himself with. But then that led to Pepper going to bed smelling fresh and clean while Tony crawled between the sheets either covered with oil or sopping wet from a hasty shower.

By Thursday, things erupted into an all-out shouting war over absolutely nothing. And they both knew it was about nothing. But that was easier than Pepper confessing that she’d spent twenty minutes trying to track down tests she swore she locked in her office (they were there the whole time, just hiding under a stack of scantron sheets). And Tony didn’t want to talk about how a seven-year-old cried in his lab because he was struggling so hard with his test. Instead, it all came out in a yelling match over... Neither of them could remember any more.

By Friday, the couple ignored the quiet betting all around them by the staff in the school hallways. It was the one gambling pool of the entire year that Tony didn’t have a hand in. Pepper knew their co-workers bet money on whether or not they would have a knock-down drag out at school, where it would take place, how long it would last, and what the topic would be. In three years of being married to each other, Tony and Pepper had yet to give into making such a scene. But it was still early in their marriage.

Even though it didn’t seem physically possible, both Tony and Pepper worked harder that day than any other in the week. Labs were picked up, tests were secured, everything was put away nice and neat so that they could both leave as soon as their contract allowed them to. Unlike most Fridays, their afterschool destination wasn’t Xavier’s, even though it was payday. Most of the staff knew the Starks would be absent and they were glad for it. “Just let them bone it out of their system,” Pepper’d heard Natasha mutter to a concerned Bruce in the hallway.

And that’s what they did. There were no elaborate wardrobe or body painting plans, no required boots or music, just being all over each other as soon as the car was parked in the garage. It was miraculous that they were able to make it to the couch in the living room, leaving a trail of clothes through the kitchen. This was how they dealt with stress and issues between them: sex.

Pepper, counselor that she was, knew that actual words would have to come into play sometime, but for right now she was just fine with Tony’s mouth being preoccupied with other things. For now, licking and nipping apologies worked just fine with her, and she did her best to reciprocate. Once they were spent, they stayed on the couch, Tony panting beneath her. They kept quiet as their skin cooled and their heart rates returned to normal.

“Sorry,” Tony mumbled into her hair.

Pepper smiled softly and placed a kiss on his shoulder. “Me, too. Thank god state testing only happens once a year.”

Tony chuckled his agreement. "Dinner?"

"I was thinking we could order pizza and then crash on the couch all night. Once we clean if off."

Tony gave her a half-hearted wave. "We have two couches. It's fine. We can have a sex couch and an everything else couch. Where do you want pizza from?"

"Gargiannos?" Pepper suggested.

The groan that name pulled out of her husband was nearly as obscene as the noises coming from him pre-orgasm. "You," he started in between marking a line of kisses down her throat, "are the sexiest thing ever."

"I'm also the only one on this couch who's smart enough to keep the restaurant's number in their cell," she replied before climbing off of him.

Tony threw his arms up in the air. "Best wife ever."

Commencement

Chapter Notes

Just to be clear, because there seems to have been some confusion: Even though the school year is ending, this story is not. **the_wordbutler** have many plans, and it will take more than nine months to tell them. We said from the beginning that we would write this story until it stopped being fun, and we're nowhere near that place. So enjoy.

“Are you lurking here just to lurk, or are you starting a street gang?”

Natasha Romanoff was about the last person that Clint'd ever expected to run into outside the crappy community health clinic on a Sunday morning, but then again, Natasha liked messing with people's expectations. Her hair hung in a bouncy ponytail as she hiked herself up on the concrete retaining wall next to him. She breathed a little heavier than usual, and her tank top—

“You sweat on me, you're gonna have to call in dead to school on Monday,” he informed her.

She grinned and swigged her water bottle. “Are you going to have to call in delinquent?”

He shrugged. “Maybe I just like the seventies-era strip mall ambiance.”

She snorted. “Phil's hooked on phonics program is really helping with your vocabulary,” she replied, and the snort turned to laughter when Clint elbowed her in the ribs.

A spring breeze hard enough to ruffle their hair blew past, and Clint checked his watch again. Barney's substance abuse counseling—part of his endless list of parole conditions, not that Clint checked on the damn things—had a good twenty minutes left, and Clint felt itchy. Barney'd asked him to just drop him at the curb, and he'd bitched when Clint said no. No reasonable person'd leave his felon brother alone all Sunday—especially when that brother kept disappearing in the evenings, or rolling back into the house an hour after Clint and Phil arrived home after school.

He tried not to worry. Phil kept telling him to relax about it, anyway.

Instead, he felt like somebody'd strung him tighter than a bow string.

Next to him, Natasha swung her legs up to sit cross-legged. “Seriously,” she said, tilting her head in his direction, “lurking or street gang? Because one of those things opens up your position for next year.”

He rolled his eyes. “You have somebody else in mind for the job?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“On whether you'll start acting like yourself again once you're unemployed.”

Clint jerked his head to look at her so hard his teeth rattled, but Natasha just raised a perfect red eyebrow. They stared each other down for a couple seconds—him with a fish-face of surprise (at

least, he assumed), her with unflinching focus—before he finally sighed. He dragged a hand through his hair and shook his head. “My brother’s staying with us.”

“I heard. But I also think there’s more to it than that.”

He sorted and rolled his eyes. “You missed a calling as a spy or something. Name like Romanoff, ability to read people? You’re prime KGB material.”

She smirked. “I’ll leave that to Barnes.”

“I think he’d need to stop fucking Rogers in every room of the school to be a spy.”

“I’m sure he could be persuaded,” she replied slyly, and he laughed when she slashed across her pale neck with one single red-tipped fingernail. She grinned back.

The banter faded away too quickly, though, and Clint finally sighed. “Barney’s— We both were fuck-up kids in our own way, but Barney got it worse than me. He fell in with one wrong crowd after another, and suddenly, he was doing jail time while I was working my tail off to get into college.” A quick glance over at Natasha revealed that she’d pursed her lips into a tight line. Clint shook his head again. “He’s smart,” he admitted, “and he’s got good instincts about a lot of stuff. People, especially. But it’s like nobody ever told him that he’s got an option other than being a fuck-up, so he’s never tried anything else.”

“Did you ever tell him?” Natasha asked quietly. When he glanced over, she shrugged with one shoulder. “Did you ever tell him that he can be something other than a fuck-up?”

Their eyes locked for a second, Natasha with her water bottle halfway to her lips and Clint with his throat drying out. When she finally quirked an eyebrow at him, he groaned. Leaning back too far almost tipped him into the flower bed, but he leaned back anyway. “Seriously, Phil?” he asked the sky while Natasha chuckled. “You sent reinforcements? Your lectures weren’t enough?”

“To be fair,” Natasha said, her lips still tipped into a smile, “he only asked me to check on you. You volunteered the whole story.”

“Is he your secret KGB handler?” Clint demanded. She snorted as she sipped her water, and he scrubbed his hands over his face. “Is this what I married into? Sneaky husbands who plot with Russian redheads?”

“Yes.” He groaned again—and then swore when Natasha smacked him hard in the thigh with her water bottle. “Phil knows you love your brother,” she said, voice suddenly serious. “Sitting here and talking to you for five minutes, I know, too. But I also know that acting like his mother isn’t helping him avoid his self-fulfilling prophecy. It’s leading him *into* it.”

Clint rolled his lips together and glanced back out across the strip mall. Natasha, apparently pretty pleased with herself, finished the last couple sips of water in her bottle before swinging down off the retaining wall. She tossed the empty at Clint, and he caught it one-handed while he glared at her. “You’re not right,” he said.

“I’m always right,” she replied. She stretched one leg back behind her, then another. “Just talk to your brother.”

“Because you’re the expert at talking about feelings?”

She shrugged as she dropped her foot back onto the pavement. “Last time I took your feeling-related advice, it got me laid.”

“Kind of comparing apples to oranges there, Tasha.”

“Depends on how cute your brother is,” she returned, and he flipped her off as she started jogging down the sidewalk. She waved back to him, grinning, and he added a few other lewd hand gestures to the collection.

When Barney walked out of the counselling center ten minutes later, he groaned. “You’re not my fucking dad,” he reminded Clint as Clint slid off the retaining wall. “What’s next, you’re gonna start clipping my toenails for me? Cutting my meat?”

Clint grit his teeth for a second before he forced himself to smile. “You hungry?”

Barney stopped in the middle of throwing up his hands to stare. “Hungry?”

“Yeah. You know, when your body needs food and starts telling you—”

“I know what hunger is, jackass,” Barney cut him off, and Clint grinned as he ducked away from the mostly friendly slap to the back of the head. They watched each other for a second, Clint’s eyebrows raised and Barney looking almost sheepish, before Barney shoved his hands in his pockets. “You buying?”

“Yeah, and we’re going to Phil’s favorite place without inviting him,” Clint replied, and he liked that after all those messed-up years, he could still crack his brother up.

As Natasha walked the length of the front hall, she was surprised to see Jessica Cage standing outside Bruce’s classroom door. There’d been rumors of the new mom bringing in her daughter to show off, but Natasha had forgotten about the chain of e-mails regarding the subject until just now. She’d been too consumed with coordinating with the various grade levels and organizing her equipment for the series of field days that would take place next week.

Jessica smiled as Natasha approached, and she returned the sentiment. The fifth-grade teacher looked exhausted, but happy. Bruce caught on to someone approaching and slowly turned in place. Cuddled against his chest was a barefoot, mocha-skinned newborn. She slept contentedly, a tiny thing wearing a white shirt and hot pink pants with extraneous ruffles on the butt.

Most women would swoon at the image, especially with Bruce’s shy smile beaming above the baby’s head, but all it did was quicken Natasha’s pulse—and not in a good way.

“Meet Dani,” Bruce’d greeted when she was close enough for him to speak softly without disturbing the baby.

Natasha smiled politely at the newborn before turning to Jessica and congratulating her.

“Thanks,” Jessica replied. “We both managed to get cleaned up and fully dressed today—big accomplishment.”

“How’s Luke doing with all of this?” Bruce asked.

Jessica’s face pinched for a second before she spoke. “He had to go back to work sooner than he wanted, but we’re managing. She’s got him completely wrapped around her little finger.”

“I’m sure,” Bruce replied, his right hand gently rubbing up and down the baby’s tiny back.

“So how badly is Wilson ruining my classroom?”

“Seems to be doing okay,” Natasha answered. “There’ve been a few tears, but mostly from him.”

“And the Hill twins?”

Natasha shrugged. “Not a peep the last couple weeks.”

“Really?” Jessica shot back, skepticism obvious in her voice—and for good reason.

“Current theory is that they’re trying to prove to their mom that they can behave so they can go live with their dad.”

“And of course they’re not trying to pull this until after they’re done at our school,” Jessica grumbled. “Hopefully it doesn’t work. They deserve to be stuck under their mom’s constant vigilance.” She paused to take a look around the hallway to see who might listen in. “What’s this I hear about her dating Sitwell?”

“Carol’s your source on that,” Bruce informed her. “She has a terrifying obsession with that relationship.”

Jessica smirked at that. “Speaking of relationships: the two of you are welcome, by the way.”

“For what?” Natasha asked.

“Rumor has it you two hooked up at my wedding. If I hadn’t gotten married, that wouldn’t have happened. So, you’re welcome for all the sex.” She paused as her face crumpled a bit once more. “I miss sex. Consequence-free, just-for-the-fun-of-it sex. What’s that like anymore? This one,” she said while nodding her head in the direction of her daughter, “decided our wedding night would be a prime time to be conceived. Just think, you two could have a newborn like this.”

Natasha tried to keep her gulp as silent as possible and felt guilty as Bruce smiled shyly into Dani’s mess of hair. The baby started to fuss, and Bruce swayed gently from side to side, humming some random melody under his breath. She knew the sight would make some women open their legs then and there and beg for a baby, but not her. She was just fine having a life that didn’t involve things that are extremely breakable and completely dependent upon you. Natasha cleaned up enough bodily fluids at her job to not need to come home to it, too.

“You wanna hold her?” Bruce asked.

Natasha shook her head. “She looks happy where she is.”

A second later, Phil and Clint came around the corner, leaving earlier than normal to go collect one last round of books for the weekend sale. Clint wrapped his arms around Jessica and began to spew how he’d never take her lack of crazy for granted ever again. “Seriously,” he continued. “Your sanity is amazing.”

“Wilson that bad?”

“He’s just different,” Phil answered for his husband. “And you know how Clint is with change.”

Jessica laughed while Clint practiced his insulted face. Once he caught onto the direction Phil was staring, Clint rolled his eyes. “Banner, fork the kid over for a second. There’s no way in hell we’re going to leave until someone gets his cuddle on.”

Phil tried his best not look embarrassed. “We can leave, it’s fine.”

“Yeah, right. You’ll be sighing all night long about how you miss your nieces and nephews being that tiny, and you’ll end up huddled in a corner of the couch with the dog all night long.” Phil only shook his head as a response as he adjusted Dani to rest against his chest with her face in the crook of his neck. “Seriously?” Clint whined. “You have to hold her like that?”

“Do you want her to cry?” Phil asked.

“I want you to not smell like baby when we have sex tonight. I had plans for that spot on your neck.”

“And no one wants to hear about them,” Natasha said.

Clint sent her a smug, challenging look. “I dare you to hug Banner right now, bury your face in his chest, and take in a deep inhale of baby.”

“I’d respond,” Natasha shot back, “but I don’t want to introduce a newborn to such foul language or hand gestures.”

“Please,” Jessica snorted. “You have obviously never spent a lot of time with my husband or his friends.” She motioned for Phil to hand Dani back. “C’mon, little bit. We’ve got a few more crazy people to introduce you to, then we’re heading back home.”

“What are you doing?” Peter Parker asked, and Wade wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

It wasn’t like he was doing anything weird or forbidden or *creepy*, it was just that the super-short lunch afforded teachers left no time to actually eat a real meal, and he had leftover pancakes from breakfast the other day, and— Look, the end result was that he was eating a stack of pancakes at Jessica Cage’s desk twenty minutes after the final bell, with syrup on his tie and everything, but he was allowed to do that if he wanted.

“I’m allowed to do this if I want,” he informed Peter.

Peter, May Parker’s skinny little nephew with the tight jeans and the ironic hipster mannerisms and the crazy enthusiasm he usually boarded up like an abandoned warehouse, rolled his eyes. Wade rolled his eyes back, Peter sneered at him a little, and he smiled as he dove back into his pancakes. Peter reminded Wade of the pesky spider in his bathroom, the one that popped up from time to time but that didn’t really deserve being smashed against the wall. They’d become sort of weird, non-friend friends, Wade and the spider.

And Wade and Peter.

Since they were both mouthy weirdos who were a *little* out of their depth, not that Wade planned on admitting that to anybody in the near future.

“I’m serious,” Peter repeated, dropping his hands on his hips. “What the hell are you doing?”

“And I’m serious in saying that I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Peter huffed out a breath and practically slammed the classroom door behind him, closing them in with no adult supervision. Wade swallowed a bite of pancake without chewing. “You know, if you plan on bad-touching me, I’m going to mandated-report it and then you’ll never be a real boy,” he said. Peter snorted at him again, stalking through the sea of desks—all moved around because they’d played “area games” on the floor with painter’s tape and the floor tiles, it was better if you didn’t understand the rules, really—and heading in his direction. Wade scowled. “Okay, you’re making me nervous. Because you’re tiny, so I could take you—”

“Maybe in an alternate universe,” Peter returned.

“Okay, *that* I am not even going to dignify with an answer, because it’s so ridiculous that I— Hey! Ow!”

The first pen Peter flicked in his direction missed, and the second one would’ve hit except Wade raised a math book and deflected it away. When he grabbed another one out of the cup on Cage’s desk, Wade threw up his hands, textbook and all. “Uncle!” he half-squeaked, but Peter cocked his hand back anyway. “Aunt? Cousin? Come on, we were half-civil back when you were a baby almost-teacher and I came in sub and occasionally steal the last of your chips because you never— Ow!”

The pen pinged off his skull hard enough that he felt it in his molars, but Peter ignored him to glare. “You haven’t applied for Bucky’s position,” he announced, and Wade slowly lowered the math book to peek out at him. “I’m not technically supposed to know that,” he admitted, deflating a little, “but Aunt May was talking about a couple of the choir kids who think you’re god, so I asked around, and it turns out you haven’t applied.”

“Well, yeah,” Wade admitted. The fight seeped out of Peter’s stance, so he set the book back down. “I’m an art teacher. I mean, you knew that, right? Big shiny art history degree, plus the itty-bitty *so you wanted to be a teacher after all* degree next to it, I’m positive everybody else got the memo—”

“You’re a good teacher,” Peter interrupted, and Wade snapped his lips shut to stare at him. “Really good. All the weird kinds, or the ones who don’t fit into their skin yet, they *love* you. You make the whole ‘weird kid at school’ thing suck a lot less.”

“Only because I’m the giant weird kid at school,” Wade pointed out.

“*Exactly.*” He frowned, but Peter just sighed and shook his head. “I could have used a teacher like you when I was a kid. After everything that happened to my parents? I needed somebody who’d make it feel less weird, and I never got it.” He jabbed a finger in Wade’s direction. “You could be that.”

“Yeah, except not in your new job. Or at least, the job that’ll clearly be yours the second you apply even if you’re trying to hand it to me instead of take it yourself, Skinny Version of Barnes.” Peter looked ready to fling another pen at him, so Wade raised both his hands. “Look,” he said, “it’s not that I don’t want to be a full-time teacher and, like, decorate a classroom with Georgia O’Keefes and do origami projects when Barton subjects his class to *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, but I think an attack on Rogers’s glitter kingdom’s a little late at this point.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I like subbing. It’s fun, I get to try a lot of new things, it pays the bills—”

“Really?” Peter asked.

Wade waved him off. “It pays most of the bills. You know, as long as I don’t mind clearance meat and eggs. I’m kidding, by the way.” Peter kept his pinched face, and Wade rolled his eyes. “I like what I do, and more than that, I’m not sharpening pastels into shanks and stabbing Rogers in a back alley—as cool as a painting in bloody pastel might look in the long run.”

Peter nodded—mostly in that way people nod when they totally don’t believe you—and the rest of the fight seeped out of him. Well, for about thirty seconds. “There’s an art position open at the middle school,” he said.

“Did you miss the part where you’re a shoe-in for the job here?”

“I don’t want to count all my chickens before they’re hatched.”

“They’re more than hatched, they’re *squawking*, so—”

“Wade,” Peter cut him off, his voice almost a growl. “There’s an art job open at the middle school.”

Wade rolled his lips together. “Did you come here just to yell at me about my long-term career plans?” he asked, and *oh*, Peter’s face turned redder than a beet at that. Wade cackled. “Look at that, the disinterested hipster likes me enough to be worried about my future.”

“I came to turn in my last reference letter,” Peter muttered.

“Should we hug it out? Let’s hug it out. Come here, it’s just like in that rapey Robin Thicke song, you know you want it—”

Later, Wade’d look at the job listing over at the middle school, cross his heart.

But he ended his school day at the elementary school by chasing Peter Parker down the hall, arms outstretched.

Kindergarten graduation was considered a joke in most of the staff’s eyes, and Bruce could understand that. It was barely contained chaos, and he knew it. But it helped both the parents and his students adjust to the idea of going to school all day long.

The ceremony was always held in the cafeteria in two shifts: one early in the morning and one late in the day, so as not to disturb the lunch schedule. Bruce’s job was to coordinate scheduling and send notices to the parents. The other two kindergarten teachers were charged with running the program and securing sheet cakes and punch.

The students wore paper hats with tassels made from yellow yarn. Bruce usually spent an evening watching a documentary and making knots of tassels ahead of time for the kindergarten students who couldn’t quite handle that level of fine motor skills yet. Natasha’d helped him this year, but she quickly got bored and ended up creating elaborate braids and knots instead of tassels.

Fury came down from his office to act as moderator. He told his annual string of jokes and congratulated his young students on getting to move on to a grade with a number. The principal did his best to put trepidations from both the students and the parents to ease about going to school “like the big kids.” He talked about how they would get to have more time in specials, eat lunches in the cafeteria every day, and be shining examples to the incoming kindergarteners. Once his speech was done, he called each student by name. They got to walk across the makeshift stage where their teacher handed them a diploma, which used as many small words as possible for the age group’s reading level. The teachers usually gave them hug and whispered at them to smile at their parents for a photo opportunity.

Bruce both loved and was saddened by these days. He always felt extreme pride in his students and their accomplishments, but would miss the bonds he’d spent the last school year developing. He cherished each hug received from his students and always made sure to tell them something encouraging during the contact. One thing he had in his favor was that he got to know his students early on in their time at the school. It allowed him to truly understand and appreciate their growth as they aged.

Once the ceremony was over, the cake and punch were brought out. It wasn’t long before the cafeteria was full of sugar-high kids and beaming parents. Bruce did his best to make the rounds,

finding it pretty easy to match kids with parents based on looks. It was an entertaining game all teachers played with their students' families.

Bruce turned when he heard his name called. Thor Odinson was hobbling over to him. Bruce shook his extended hand and shared his grin and nod.

"I wanted to thank you for all you've done for Goran. I know my children have not been the easiest to contend with the last few weeks, but Jane and I are immensely grateful for all that you and your fellow teachers have done for them."

Bruce shrugged. "That's our job."

Thor smiled easily. "Few do it as well as you. Jane and I will be quite sad this time next year when are children are done having you as a teacher. I know my wife appreciates having a scientist mold their young minds." He paused, a slight look of worry creasing his jovial face. "That is, if you don't mind having Alva in your class."

He chuckled. "It would feel wrong not having all three of them." Thor clapped him heavily on the shoulder and barely wobbled on his crutches as he did so. "How are you doing?" Bruce asked.

Thor looked down at his leg before answering. "Soon, we'll get to have the metal parts sticking out removed—the exoskeleton, as the boys call it. A term I am sure they learned from you. Healing goes slowly, but it is happening." He looked around, eyes searching for his son. Since he was on the other side of the cafeteria with his mother, Thor continued. "George mentioned that you spoke with him about what it is like to have some you love be in a car accident."

Bruce swallowed, unsure of how this conversation was going to go. "I shouldn't have mentioned that she didn't survive. I'm sure I scared him, and I'm sorry for that."

Thor nodded. "I appreciate that. My son—all of my children, really—have learned too quickly how harsh life can be. But I do take some comfort in the fact that there is someone they can count on who has survived such an awful event." They stood quietly for a moment before the large man quietly asked, "May ask who your friend was? George made it sound like it was someone very close to you."

He debated elaborating. This wasn't a story he shared with parents. He didn't need their pity; he'd come to as much peace on the matter as one could, but Bruce saw in the other man's eyes that he wasn't going to settle for a non-answer. "My wife, Betty," Bruce answered. "She was killed by a drunk driver eleven years ago."

When Thor found his voice, it was to offer a heartfelt apology. Bruce braced himself for a bear hug, but it didn't happen. "I cannot imagine life without my Jane," he admitted softly. "I would not be a pleasant man without her." He shook his head, blond ponytail swishing against his broad shoulders. "My respect for you has grown immensely. For you to have such a kind and caring heart after enduring that is most impressive. I am so very grateful that you are educating our children."

Bruce felt heat rise into his cheeks at the compliment. "Thank you, Thor."

Thor squeezed his shoulder once more. "Hopefully by the end of the summer, I will be more mobile. I've had to delegate my duties of president of the PTA, and I miss the interactions with the parents and the teachers. I look forward to resuming my position. And," he added with a grimace, "I fear you will require as much classroom assistance with my daughter as possible. It is mostly my fault that Alva is a touch spoiled; making frequent visits to the classroom to lessen your burden is the least I can do."

“I appreciate that,” Bruce replied with a smile

There were only three Saturdays in the entire school year where Clint and Phil allowed themselves to be on school grounds. They worked their asses off during the week and were very protective of their weekends. Exceptions to the case were the fall festival, the end of the year overnighter for exceptional Accelerated Readers, and the summer book sale. The last two on the list always fell on back-to-back weekends, and Clint always made it abundantly clear that the following Saturday, they would not be leaving the bed.

The summer book sale happened for two main reasons. The first was to act as a final push before the final scores of Accelerated Reader points were tallied. If students earned enough points from reading books and taking comprehension tests about them, they were invited to the end-of-the-year party. And if they were in fourth or fifth grade, they were eligible to stick around for the sleepover portion of said party.

The second purpose was to try and motivate the kids to keep reading over the summer. Phil had to shut down the lending option of his library with a few weeks left in school in order to keep his inventory intact. Otherwise, he'd be chasing down unreturned items all summer. But he still stressed the importance of keeping up with reading over the summer. He told the kids that if he saw them at the park or the grocery store—two common occurrences—he would ask them what they'd been reading, and he knew when they were lying.

The book sale was always a ton of work, and having it occur the week before the big blowout AR party made things hectic. Because having his felon brother-in-law crash at their house and cause unlimited tension wasn't enough fun.

That was one of the upsides to the fair this year. Both Clint and Phil needed a distraction from Barney. It wasn't that Phil saw his brother-in-law as a bad guy, it was just a challenge. No one in the Coulson family had a criminal record; thus, Phil was swimming into new territory with learning all the rules for probation and whatnot. The worst part was watching Clint and Barney dance around each other; instead of having actual conversations about what was happening, the brothers seemed content to settle for sniping at each other. They were both trying the hardest they could with the situation, but Phil wasn't about to step in and mediate. That was a last ditch effort kind of thing.

Phil'd used this week to distract both his husband and himself from their home life. Together, Clint and Phil traveled around to local libraries and book stores to complete their annual donation requests. The area was now familiar with the setup, and most places kept a stockpile that they slowly added to over the course of the year so that they'd have plenty to offer when the men showed up each May.

Books were sold at a ridiculously cheap price—fifty cents for paperbacks and a dollar for hard covers. Phil wanted to make sure that even the lower-income families could walk away with a book or two. Since all the books were donated, profits would be squirreled away in Phil's library coffer. The funds would be used to supplement the library budget or to help fund purchases at the far more expensive book fair for the students who couldn't afford things.

Clint and Phil, as well as their close friends, arrived early in the morning in order to set up tables in the cordoned-off area of the parking lot. The men made sure to bribe their co-workers with plenty of coffee first thing. Plus, Clint baked cookies as a thank you, each teacher taking home a large bag of homemade goodies.

They spent an hour arranging books on tables according to reading level. Phil made signs to show

which color dot—the system to show level of difficulty for Accelerated Reader—each table’s goods contained. The next four hours were spent chatting with students, suggesting book titles, talking with parents, and basically doing their best to peddle all their wares so that there were fewer items to store in the already cramped closet between the library and Tony’s computer lab.

Most of the tables were cleared off when all was said and done. Since Bruce and Tony sacrificed their weekly meeting to help out, they (and by they, it was mostly Tony) demanded that they all go to the diner so at least their weekly milkshake quota could be met. The group made quick work of tearing things down and carpooled over to the diner. They crammed themselves into as few booths as possible, and Phil took a moment to enjoy having so many friends around him. He felt a squeeze on his thigh and a silent question from Clint to see if everything was okay. Phil smiled back as an answer.

“Sorry,” Clint apologized quietly.

“For what?”

“This is your busiest time of the year, and I’ve been a little distracted.”

“You have a pretty good excuse,” Phil offered.

Clint shrugged. “Still feel like a shitty husband.”

It was Phil’s turn to squeeze a thigh for that. “Not possible.”

They shared a quick kiss that was interrupted, unsurprisingly, but Tony’s loud complaint. The technology teacher then began to warn Barnes, who was barely able to call himself the newbie of the group since the school year was almost over, about how Clint and Phil would barely kick off the sleepover portion of the Accelerated Reader party before they snuck off to do who-knows-what.

Clint shot a disgruntled look at Steve and Bucky. “Guess we’ll have competition over that, too.”

Natasha groaned. “Please don’t turn this into a sex-off. There are small children involved.”

Clint smirked. “You’re just jealous because Banner won’t do anything kinky on school grounds.”

“Is that a challenge?” Natasha asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” Bruce answered firmly.

“Wuss,” Tony fake coughed.

The wonderful thing about the Odinsons—if Darcy needed to name just one, which was kind of a big ask of her—was the way they threw ridiculous parties with reckless abandon.

Back when Darcy graduated kindergarten, nobody called it kindergarten *graduation*, they called it promotion and everybody except that paste-eater moved up into first grade the next year. But kindergarten graduation’d turned into a *thing* over the last twenty-odd years, and Thor and Jane just sort of dove into the experience head-first. They bought graduation balloons and a graduation cake, they hung some weird pin-the-tassel-on-the-graduate game on the back door and sent the kids up with sticker after sticker (the graduate now had a polka-dot butt), they grilled meats and handed out beers. The grandparent Odinsons showed up, plus just about all of Thor’s friends, and they played bocce ball and ate hot dogs and laughed until they almost threw up.

Darcy suspected that George came close to throwing up a couple different times. Kid could pack it away.

After the biggest part of the celebration, once the sun started setting, Darcy sat out on the lawn with the kids while the adults all sort of moseyed over to the fire pit. She'd planned on joining them at first, but then Alva'd wanted to tell "spooky stories" (mostly dramatic reenactments of Disney movies) and the boys wanted to sneak extra pieces of cake. Alva'd flopped down on Darcy's lap, Henry and George'd bantered with each other while rolling a soccer ball back and forth between them, and Darcy—

Look, she never was and never will be a love-sick puppy or anything, but she avoided eye contact with Loki, same as always.

"Did you get a party when you graduated?" Alva asked suddenly, and Darcy kind of jerked out of her cake-and-beer haze to blink down at the girl. Alva rolled her head against one of her boobs to peer up at her. "Mama says that graduations are special and everybody should get a party."

"Or get a party on the anniversary of their graduation," Henry said authoritatively.

Darcy frowned. "On the what?"

"The graduation anniversary." Henry shot her a look that kind of suggested she was the stupidest person on the planet. "Dad said that even though I didn't graduate, I get a graduation anniversary. But only the second and third year after you leave kindergarten."

Darcy bit her lip to hide her grin. "You mean only the years your siblings graduate kindergarten and you're liable to get jealous, right?"

"No, that's not what Dad said," Henry retorted.

"I'm sure it's *not*," Darcy replied, and man, she wanted to high-five Thor for his latest little white parenting lie.

George decided he wanted another juice box a couple minutes later, though, so the boys ran off, half-pushing each other as they raced across the yard. Darcy tipped herself and Alva back enough that she could lean on her elbows and enjoy the last couple sips of her beer. At least, until Alva said, "You seem like Mama did when Daddy first got hurt."

Darcy almost dribbled beer down her chin, she choked so hard. "Say what?" she asked, still sputtering a little.

Alva sighed and pillowed her head against Darcy's shoulder. "Mama was quiet after Daddy got hurt," she explained. "Like how little animals—like kitties and bunnies—go someplace safe and hide when they're scared. Only you're not hiding, you're right here."

Darcy snorted a little. "Lemme guess: Miss Potts showed you more about how animals deal with fear?" The girl nodded, her face lighting up in a grin, and Darcy considered hugging her hard enough to hurt her. She settled for stroking a hand over her soft hair. "Well, for what it's worth, and not that I think you'll even believe me, I'm not scared. At least, not in the way you're thinking, and trust me when I say you're about twelve years too young to get the other kind of fear."

For a moment, Alva just watched her, her face twisting up in confusion. Finally, she asked, "Then what are you?"

"Huh?"

“If you’re not scared, what are you?”

Darcy felt the corner of her mouth twist up in a little smile. “A walking mountain of regret, and that’s just for starters,” she replied.

Alva needed a bathroom break around the same time Darcy finished her beer, so she released the kid and headed back toward the fire pit. The party’d wound down to just the usual suspects: Thor and Jane, Thor’s right-hand-man Heimdall (beautiful eyes and all, *lord*), Thor’s parents, and Loki. Loki offered her a smile from across the circle, and she smiled back, shy and stupid like a teenager. She shoved her hair behind her shoulders—and definitely *not* behind her ear like a Nicholas Sparks heroine, thank *you*—and stuck her hands out to leech heat off the flame.

“What about you, Darcy?” Frigga asked after a couple seconds of silence, and Darcy blinked as she glanced over at the older woman. “Heimdall was just telling us about his dating trials—”

“And tribulations,” Heimdall complained.

Thor laughed, and Frigga smiled sweetly. “I didn’t know if you had anyone special in your life.”

Darcy released a kind of strangled noise—like if a bird tried to snort a laugh, but with less tweeting and more choking to death—and looked back at the fire. Across the circle, Loki ducked his head and played with his beer bottle. “You know, there was this *thing* I was kind of involved in,” she said after a moment, watching as Loki jerked his head up. “It was good, and *he* was good, but I think I just kind of panicked, because I totally shattered it into a million pieces.” She shook her head. “Of course, you know how the story goes after that, right? You break it, you’re stuck with it broken even when you figure out that you don’t *want* it broken, and suddenly you’re sitting at your desk wondering if he’s not texting you back because he’s busy or because you blew it.”

When she glanced back over at Frigga—and not at Loki, *definitely* not; she already felt too nauseous just saying those words out loud—she found the other woman smiling serenely. “I’m sure you didn’t ruin your chances with your young man.”

Darcy sighed. “I’m not so sure about that, but it’s nice to have somebody think it.”

“I think you would be surprised.”

Loki’s voice hardly carried over the crackling of the fire, tentative enough that it counted almost as a whisper. The second Darcy looked over, their eyes met, and she swore her heart leapt up into her throat. He wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t frowning; if anything, he looked frozen between the two expressions, like he didn’t know which way his mouth should tip.

Darcy swallowed around her stupid heart. “Would I?” she asked.

Across the fire pit, Loki’s lips curled into a smile that drew the air right out of her lungs. “As I agree with my mother’s assessment, yes,” he returned, and casually sipped his beer.

Fresh Starts

Chapter Notes

You know how I said last chapter that this story would continue for a while? Don't freak out--it still will, but Kate and I figured out a better way to organize it. There will be one more chapter after this, and then we will mark 180 Days and Counting as complete. That will let us kick off "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" where we, as the uncreative title says, spend a chapter on each character or pairing to see how their summer went. Once that's done, we will start a third story for year two. Sound good? Hope so.

Bucky and Steve were putting the last of the dishes away when someone started pounding on the front door. Steve shot Bucky a confused look while he felt his stomach twist forebodingly. There was only one person who would beat on his door like that, and she only made such a racket when her head was a mess.

"I'll get it," Steve announced before walking away. Bucky knew he should warn him, but at the moment, he was too busy fighting the urge to sneak out the back door.

"Leave, Rogers," Natasha demanded as soon as the door opened.

"Um," Steve sputtered, turning to look at Bucky.

But Bucky instead gave his attention to the redhead who was letting herself into the house, paper-bag-covered bottle in hand. "You don't get to kick him out of his house."

She arched an eyebrow his direction, and her smirk set the hairs on the back of Bucky's neck on end. "*His* house? Not yours too?"

Bucky watched Steve grind his jaw, and he quickly closed the space between them. "Probably safer if you ran away for a bit," Bucky said quietly as he rubbed Steve's lower back. "Let me quell the banshee. I'll text you when the coast is clear."

"Yeah, okay," he replied, looking not-at-all happy about the situation—not that Bucky could blame him.

Bucky gave him a quick kiss goodbye. "By the way," he added before Steve slipped out the front door, "odds are good she's going to get me drunk."

"Yup," Natasha agreed from the kitchen where, from the sounds of things, she was rummaging the cabinets for shot glasses.

Steve sighed, but kept his mouth shut. Bucky gave him another quick kiss before nudging him out the door. He watched Steve start a walk around the neighborhood before he turned back towards his old friend. She harshly set a full shot on the counter without managing to splash a drop. "Drink," she ordered before downing her own vodka.

Bucky ran his fingers up and down the little glass while staring at her. "You will never do this again. I'm sorry you're upset, but you don't get to walk in here and order people out of their home.

I don't care how good of friends we are."

Natasha's stony expression didn't waver one iota. "Drink," she repeated as she refilled her own glass and took another swallow.

Bucky swore under his breath before taking his shot. He kept his hand over the top of the glass to keep her from refilling it. Ignoring her glare, he did his best to get her to use her words. "What crawled up your ass?"

Natasha looked out the window over the kitchen sink, lost in thought. Bucky felt his patience grow increasingly thin. Without a word, she grabbed the bottle of vodka and headed for the small back yard; Bucky followed. She took one of the two seats around the little fire pit Steve built a few weeks ago and looked at him expectantly. Obeying her silent command, Bucky got a little fire glowing—nothing too big, since the May heat and humidity was still oppressive, even at dusk.

"You're not mixing your vodka with fire," he warned. "This isn't going to be a repeat of that one time from junior year."

She smiled briefly at that before taking a swig from the bottle. Passing it over to him as he took a seat, she kept her eyes on the flame. "What do you know about Bruce's past?" she asked quietly, barely loud enough to carry over the crackle of the burning wood.

Bucky's eyebrows rose. "He likes science and doesn't drink?"

"You know why about the no drinking thing?"

"No," Bucky answered quietly. "What happened to letting people tell their own story?" he asked, remembering back to his first day where he begged for background on his new coworkers.

"Apparently his story is mine now, too," she muttered. Bucky didn't say anything, just watched her stare into the fire. "His wife was killed by a drunk driver."

"He was married?"

Natasha nodded. "Happened a while ago." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Honestly never thought much about it. I mean, I knew it might make him skiddish about some things, but that was fine."

"So what changed?"

She took another swig from the bottle and passed it over to him. "Jessica Cage had a baby."

Bucky squinted at her. Maybe it was the vodka that was starting to burn in his gut, but for some reason that answer didn't make sense. "How does that affect you?"

"Because Bruce smelled baby, and it reminded him about how he was supposed to be a dad by now."

"Ahh," Bucky replied.

"Yeah," she said before taking another drink from the bottle. "Apparently, they had some timeline set up, and their kid would've been old enough for kindergarten next year. He started talking about looking at his students come August to try and see what their kid would've looked like." Natasha sighed and shook her head. "He wants kids."

“Did he actually say that?”

“He didn’t have to. It was written all over his face.”

Bucky shrugged lazily. “At one point he wanted kids, but you don’t know if he wants to have a kid now.”

Natasha looked at him like he was an idiot. “Trust me, James, he wants kids.”

“And you don’t?”

“I’d be a terrible mother.”

He smiled at her. “I’ve seen you with our students. I think you’d be just fine.”

Natasha shook her head. “That’s different. That’s...short-term. And they’re not actual babies, even though they may whine like it.”

“I still think you should do it.”

She turned to him, face hard. He knew this game, how it took a second for the words to penetrate her walls and sink in. But her expression just turned sharper. “I shouldn’t have come here,” she said as she stood and turned to leave.

Bucky leaned over and grabbed her by the wrist. “Nat, what are you talking about?”

She laughed, something quick and bitter. “Look at your life, James. You got the fairy tale. You aren’t able to understand things like this. Not anymore.”

“Nat,” he called as she pulled away from him and began to walk around to the front of the house. She never turned around, and Bucky stopped chasing her once he reached the driveway. Natasha climbed into her jeep and drove away without another word.

A couple minutes later, Steve ambled up to Bucky’s side. Dollars to doughnuts said that he was lurking behind the big tree in the neighbor’s yard to know when the coast was clear.

“Everything okay?” he asked, his hand finding Bucky’s hip.

He shook his head. “And I don’t know how to fix it. It’s like... She doesn’t trust me anymore.”

Steve’s mouth creased into a frown, but he didn’t say anything. Just nudged Bucky back toward the back yard so they could enjoy what was left of the fire and vodka.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” Clint muttered, and Birdie snuffled his bare feet.

He stood in their kitchen at the ass-crack of dawn, one hand buried in his hair while he waited for the coffee maker to finish burbling and spit out some glorious caffeine. Outside, the first couple fingers of sunlight’d already started to push over the horizon—too early, as far as Clint was concerned—but Birdie’d started half-barking at her own shadow ten minutes ago and he’d decided to roll out of bed. Roll out of bed, shoo the dog down the hall so Phil could sleep, and at least start the coffee.

Except when he’d stepped into the living room, it was just in time to watch Barney climb into somebody’s ancient rusted-out SUV and disappear down the street.

Ten minutes later, he was still half-awake, but now, half-awake and *pissed*.

And Birdie kept snuffling around where her favorite “Uncle Barney” (Barney’s name for himself, the asshole) had fallen asleep on the couch last night.

Once he woke up enough to function (so, after two cups of coffee and a hot shower where he stewed like an asshole), he found his phone and texted Barney a quick *we need to talk when you get home*. He tossed his phone onto the bathroom counter and stared at himself in the mirror until Phil wandered in, sleep-mussed and mostly naked.

He pressed himself to Clint’s back. “Should I ask?” he asked, slow enough for Clint to read his lips in his reflection.

“Can’t you guess?” Phil smiled ruefully, and Clint relaxed into his grip. He felt warm and familiar, and he smelled like their sheets. “What the hell am I supposed to do with him?”

“I thought you were trying to talk to him.”

“Yeah, sure, we talked. And then this morning, he jumps in some ancient piece of shit car and disappears to god-knows-where.” Phil quirked an eyebrow, and Clint twisted around to scowl at him. “What?”

“You can’t always assume the worst.” When Clint rolled his eyes, Phil caught him by the arms and held him tight. “Your brother isn’t any of the people you knew when you were younger, Clint. He’s not your father, he’s not the people who hurt you and made you feel—” He paused and rolled his lips together. “He might not be doing everything the way you’d choose to do it,” he finished, “but he’s trying.”

“You can’t know that,” Clint retorted.

“Since he’s related to you, it’s a fair guess.”

Clint left Phil in the bathroom after that, and they got dressed and headed to school like any other day. Clint tried harder than he’d ever tried before to put Barney out of his mind and focus on the important things—his students wrapping up their final projects of the year, his first steps in tearing down his classroom for the summer, the finishing touches on his part of the fifth-grade promotion part of their end-of-the-year assembly—but he kept thinking about the rusted-out SUV and Barney with his hand hanging out the passenger’s side, cigarette in his fingers.

It reminded him a lot of back when they were kids, Barney hanging out of somebody’s old car, smoking and laughing, fearless through-and-through.

And look how well that’d served him over the years.

When he and Phil pulled up after work, the windows were already open and Birdie was yapping happily inside. Clint ditched his work bag in the car and discovered his brother on the couch in the same shitty clothes he’d worn that morning playing tug-of-war with the dog. He dropped the “rope”—an old tube sock of Clint’s Birdie stole years before—when Clint walked in the door, and Birdie wagged her whole butt as she brought it over.

Clint ignored her to stare at his brother.

Barney just leaned back against the couch. “This the part where I get the lecture on flying right from my little brother?” he asked, stretching out like the smuggest cat Clint had ever met.

Clint felt his jaw tighten into a hard line. He almost flew right toward Barney, dragged him up by his shirt or something, but then Phil was there with a firm hand on his shoulder. "I'm taking Birdie down to the park and back," he said, his voice the kind of neutral he saved for *really* badly behaved students. "We'll be back soon."

The park was three blocks, tops.

A limited window, Clint knew, and a warning.

He waited until the door closed behind Phil to wet his lips. "Where are you going?"

Barney shrugged. "Out."

"No, not *out*," Clint snapped, and his brother rolled his eyes. He jabbed a finger at him. "No, 'out' is what you do when you need a pack of smokes or a roll of toilet paper, Barney. 'Out' isn't leaving at the ass-crack of dawn or skipping out on appointments with your P.O. 'Out' isn't heading for a 'walk' after dinner and not coming back till after Phil and I are in bed."

His brother snorted and shook his head. "You're like somebody's fucking dad," he grumbled, and Clint felt his whole body tense up. "Is that your problem? You and your guy, you don't have kids, so you parent me? 'Cause last I checked, I covered your ass when we were kids. I kept you out of trouble. I was more a parent to you than any adult we knew, so if this is payback—"

"You stopped being a parent to me a *long* damn time ago," Clint cut in. His voice sounded rough, angrier than he expected, and he swore that the only reason he didn't haul Barney off the damn couch himself was because Barney pushed himself up onto his feet the second Clint rounded the coffee table. That didn't stop him from shoving Barney's shoulder hard enough that the guy had to take a step back. "You want me to treat you like a fucking adult? Then *act* like one! This isn't jail anymore. You don't get three hot meals and a bed *and* get to bite the hand that feeds you. It doesn't work that way, not here. Not anymore."

For a second, Barney just stared at him with this weird, wide-eyed expression, one that looked like hurt and shock and anger all rolled into one big, ugly ball. Then, finally, he huffed out a breath. It wasn't a laugh, exactly, more this scoffing sound like he maybe wanted to roll his eyes. He dug into his pocket, Clint staring the whole time, and pulled out a wad of cash.

"No free ride from the kid brother, got it," he said, peeling off a couple twenties. He tossed them onto the coffee table. "Sixty bucks enough? You want eighty? I can give you eighty." Another twenty fluttered down. Clint blinked at him, not really understanding, and Barney snorted. "You want to test them for coke or something, be my guest. Since I'm sure you don't believe I earned it the old-fashioned way."

He shoved the rest of his cash back into his pocket and headed straight for the door. Clint shook his head hard, trying to clear out the cobwebs, but found himself still staring at him like an idiot. "What the hell is going on with you?" he managed, and his voice sounded all wrong to his own ears: confused and frustrated, a little angry and a lot *worried*.

Barney glanced over his shoulder. "Maybe next time, you'll ask like you give a shit," he returned, and he shoved out the front door without looking back again.

"Okay, pro-tip: don't look like you're going to throw up, it's just gonna encourage them."

Peter Parker jerked his head up from his fiftieth recheck of his résumé to find that Darcy'd stopped painting her nails and started blowing them dry. He'd arrived for his interview a good twenty

minutes early. He'd felt *crazy* for it—over-eager—but Aunt May'd rolled her eyes.

"Nick likes a punctual interviewee," she'd said over the tops of her glasses. She'd been reading the newspaper like every Sunday morning. "If you're late, he'll remember."

"You call him Nick?" Gwen'd asked. She'd come for breakfast super early and in no way spent the night in Peter's room after climbing in through the window, because that'd be weird and break one of Aunt May's "tenets of happy living with your old and decrepit aunt, Peter." Peter'd sent her a look, and she'd laughed. "What? I've seen that guy. He looks like he'd murder you at ten paces just for thinking his first name."

"After you've worked for someone for as long as I have, you come to certain understandings," Aunt May'd replied cryptically before snapping the paper back up.

Darcy'd rolled his eyes when Peter'd walked in twenty minutes early. He suspected then (not for the first time) that his aunt might be trolling him a little.

"I'm not nervous," he lied as he closed his faux leather portfolio with the pad of paper and the (six) extra copies of his résumé. "I'm just trying to be prepared."

"Yeah, except you look like you want to hurl," Darcy replied. She dropped her hand back onto her desk. "You worked here all fall. You know all the people in that room better than any of the other potential teachers. And I think Fury might actually kind of like you."

Peter felt his eyes widen. "Really?"

"No, but at least you don't look so pale now." He screwed up his face at her, and she laughed. "You'll be fine," she promised.

"I'll believe it when I see it," he muttered.

Jessica Drew emerged from the hallway that led down to the conference rooms a couple minutes later, terrifying in these red heels that no second-grade teacher wore *normally*. She shook hands with a pretty redhead—the competition, Peter thought bitterly—and then locked eyes with Peter.

He swallowed and pushed himself out of the chair. "Miss Drew," he greeted, reaching forward to shake her hand and—

"Oh, come on," she grumbled, and as he watched, she stepped out of her shoes. She rotated one foot, cringing. "These were a mistake. The next time I follow Ororo's patented 'break them in by wearing them around once all the kids leave' advice, find me and hit me in the head."

Peter blinked. "Uh," he said. Eloquently, of course.

Drew rolled her eyes. "We already know each other, Parker," she reminded him as she bent to pick up her heels. "I'm not going to go easy on you, but the 'never met you' song and dance is a young woman's game. Not that I'm old. Just too old for these." She dangled her shoes from her fingers. "Save the shake-and-stammer for Jasper and Fury."

Peter felt his throat grow thick. "Assistant Principal Sitwell's joining us?" he asked.

Jessica shrugged. "That a problem?" she asked as she started leading Peter down the hallway.

Peter shook his head. He considered stopping her, explaining about the payday Friday *incident* that she'd missed for one boyfriend or another (Peter didn't know this from experience, he'd just heard

Miss Danvers—always and forever *Miss Danvers*, no first name permitted—complaining about it), and running back down the hall. But he also wanted a full-time job, one where he wouldn't need to live with Aunt May anymore, and—

Well.

He put on his bravest face and stepped inside the conference room.

Fury immediately stood to greet him, offering him his hand first and then bottled water and a chair, but Sitwell— Sitwell just smirked. Peter forced a smile and shook his hand as warmly as he could before settling down in his assigned seat. He opened up his portfolio, clicked his pen, and pretended not to feel the heat of Sitwell's gaze bearing down on him.

"I'm not gonna waste our time pretending that we don't all know one another," Fury explained, and Peter released a half-relieved puff of breath. "Hard to have you introduce yourself when we've watched you calm down a nervy first-grader who wet himself. Let's just start right in on the important parts."

Next to Fury, Jessica Drew grinned as she started scratching something down on her own pad of paper. Peter managed to smile for real this time. "Sure," he said, and the interview began in earnest.

The first couple questions felt mostly like softballs, things about what classes he'd taken in this last semester, his long-term plans, and his hobbies. He talked a lot about his photography—look, everyone needed *something* besides work, okay?—and a little about how he thought he'd like to do curriculum design in the future. "The way future," he clarified when Drew raised an eyebrow. "I just think that there's not enough really good science curriculum for younger kids. I think a lot of the basics end up sort of glossed over, especially with all the standardized tests and stuff, and it'd be fun to bring that to the surface."

"Doesn't sound much like a bed of roses," Sitwell said conversationally, and Peter felt his blood run cold. Across the table, the man smiled at him. "Curriculum design's no pleasure cruise."

"Maybe not," Peter admitted as heat started climbing up the side of his neck, "but I'd like to try."

"Actually, that sort of brings me to my next question," Sitwell continued, leaning back in his chairs. "Can you tell me about a bad mistake—or a few—that you've made while teaching?"

Peter rolled his lips together, watching as Drew stopped writing to send Sitwell a confused glance.

"Or a time that you've had your share of sand kicked in your face but came through? A time you've faced a challenge before the whole human race but not—"

"Are you quoting a Queen song?" Drew cut in.

Sitwell coughed like he wanted to burst out laughing. Next to him, Fury pressed his lips into a tight line, and Peter resisted the urge to groan. Fury never attended happy hour, but of course he'd heard about it. He'd probably seen *video*, since Stark'd had his camera out and—

"I'm pretty sure that's 'We are the Champions,'" Drew continued as Peter felt his whole face turn a sort of crayon-box crimson. "Why the hell are you reciting 'We are the Champions' at—"

"You know, I think I'd just like to answer the question," Peter broke in. Fury raised his eye at that, and Peter forced himself to swallow. "I mean, I've made a few bad mistakes during student teaching. Who hasn't? Like, this one time, we were working on some sight word stuff in reading

circles . . . ”

By the end of the story—involving IEP accommodations, a missing beginning reading book, and a horrible misunderstanding about apples—even Sitwell looked impressed. Fury nodded the whole way through and picked up the questioning from then on out, and at the end of the interview, he shook Peter’s hand extra-fiercely. “You’ll hear back by the end of the week,” he promised, and his voice sounded so certain that Peter wanted to throw up all over again.

Better yet, Peter made Sitwell crack up when he shook his hand and asked, “Should I take my bow and my curtain call?”

Out in the office, Drew stopped him by planting a hand on his arm. “Okay, seriously, what gives with the song lyrics? Because I thought he was trolling you, but now—”

“Peter got drunk at the only payday Friday he ever attended without his aunt, stood on a chair, and belted out the whole of ‘We are the Champions’ in pretty impressive falsetto,” Darcy volunteered. She was leaning back in her chair, her arms crossed under her, uhm, feminine wiles. Her smirk sort of promised the death of mankind. “Stark’s got video, and Sitwell almost pissed himself laughing.”

Peter’s whole face turned bright red. “I’m not usually like that,” he admitted, “but it’d been a rough day and—”

Out of nowhere, like a firework, Drew burst out laughing. She squeezed Peter’s arm so hard it hurt, but in what he guessed was a friendly way. “Okay,” she declared, “you’re my favorite. Like, even if we don’t pick you—not that you’re in bad shape—you’re my favorite.” Her grin dazzled him. “You’ll fit *right* in.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “I hope so,” he admitted.

“I know so,” she said, and patted him on the arm before she disappeared back toward the conference room.

Clint loathed field day. He’d had too many crazy moments in his life for him to feel at ease with sheer chaos, and that’s exactly what this day was. The entire fifth grade would head outside to the playground. Thankfully, the event was held in the morning when it was still cool outside. Unfortunately, that meant the afternoon would be spent indoors with a bunch of sweaty pre-teens who had yet to realize that deodorant was their friend.

The entire playground was overrun with little games and challenges for the students to participate in: a hole-in-one putt-putt thing, foot races, crab walk relays, a free throw contest, and more. There was a rule that each kid had to take part in at least five events, and the teachers made sure that they weren’t all athletic in nature. The little nerds on their way to middle school were appreciative of this.

It took a god-awful number of parent volunteers to pull this thing off. They were needed for water stations, to man and keep records for the individual events, and also to just meander about and make sure the kids weren’t terribly misbehaving. Normally, it was Jessica Cage’s job to coordinate parent volunteers. Clint dreaded having to make calls in addition to being the one to organize the kids into playing games, but Wade made the offer to take care of parents. Clint wasn’t the smartest man on the planet, but he wasn’t that dumb. He immediately signed off on the idea, but made Wade promise to keep him updated on things (complete with evidence of e-mails to prove the sub wasn’t lying about numbers). To Wade’s credit, this year was the second highest turn out for parent volunteers. Clint discovered why the morning of field day: Wade made sure each helper

received a doughnut and large cup of coffee, and there was a heavy amount of flirting with all of the moms (and even a couple of the dads).

Whatever worked.

There was a tradition to this thing, as dumb as it was. The fifth grade teachers went over the rules, for the millionth time, in their classrooms. Once the students at least pretended to listen to everything, they all headed outside. The first event of the day was not for the students, but rather the teachers.

“Bring it!” Tony bellowed as he led his fellow specials teachers out to the kickball field. He waved both his hands in the air, grinning wide and sporting one of his limitless pairs of ridiculous sunglasses.

The tug-of-war contest between the fifth grade teachers and the specials teachers was a tradition that predated Clint’s time at the school, which pretty much made it ancient history. Victories were pretty evenly split between the two teams, which made competition all the fiercer. It, unsurprisingly for this particular staff, resulted in a lot of trash talk and side bets. Added to that was the private competition ongoing for the better part of a decade between Clint and Phil: loser had to do most of the work during their next sexcapade.

Whenever that could happen. Clint just considered it extra motivation to get his brother back on his feet and out of the house as soon as possible.

Stark led the students in a chant of “Specials! Specials!” Clint heard Carol, considered part of the fifth grade team since it was one of the two grades she serviced, mutter something more than likely inappropriate under her breath, but couldn’t make out the exact words.

Jasper, who’d trailed behind the specials teachers, waved the kids quiet. As he did so, a handful of the fifth graders raised both of their arms in some sort of salute. If the assistant principal noticed the act, he ignored it. Quickly, because the kids weren’t going to tolerate a huge speech, Jasper explained the rules. As he did so, Clint found himself distracted by Phil rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. His husband caught on to this, and the bastard had the nerve to lick his lips.

Game on.

Clint turned his back to Phil and proceeded to run through a series of stretches that emphasized his ass. He only stopped when Tony started whistling at him. The technology teacher then began to complain about how his team was at a disadvantage because they were wearing their usual business casual, but all the fifth grade teachers got to wear athletic wear. Carol yelled at him to stop his whining.

Jasper told the teams to take their spots. Normally, Clint anchored the end of his team’s side of the rope, but Wade had all but offered sexual favors to take the spot. Clint was reluctant at first—he had a reputation to maintain and a sex bet to win—but then Wade had stripped off his shirt. While awkward, it did prove the point that he was capable of the strength needed.

Clint took the position closest to the opposition, and Phil broke tradition to do the same. Normally, the librarian stayed towards the middle to shout encouragement to the team, but not this year. It spoke to how pathetic their love life had become when having eye sex during the tug of war contest in front of the entire fifth grade (and a number of parents) was the highlight of their day.

Jasper made sure everyone was ready, and once Tony got in one last heavily censored jab, things got going. The assistant principal used a whistle he’d borrowed from Natasha to signal the

beginning of the contest. The air was filled with screaming kids cheering on their favorite teachers to victory. It took a lot of grunting and heaving—and not the fun kind—but after a minute of struggling, Carol ordered them to give one huge pull. It resulted on Clint falling back on his ass, but his team secured victory.

Tony immediately began his usual litany of excuses while Steve, their team's anchor, helped May pick herself up off the ground. Clint caught Phil's eye and gave him the largest shit-eating grin he could manage. Phil may have rolled his eyes, but Clint didn't miss the way his husband's shoulders shook with a quiet laugh.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Carol Danvers nearly tripped off the track at the local community college as she whipped around to face—and then, was promptly passed by—one James Rhodes. He grinned at her, his whole face bright (if a little damp from the heat), and turned around to jog backwards. A few other morning joggers, all training for the same godforsaken 5K that Jessica'd signed Carol up for, glared at them before jogging right past.

Carol regained her balance and promptly flicked James off. "You're not supposed to see me when I'm sweaty."

He laughed. "Except for all those times I helped you get sweaty, you mean."

"That was *glistening*, thanks," she sneered in response, and she pretended to ignore the spike of heat in the depths of her belly as she jogged right past him and left him grinning in her dust.

All things considered, she and James had done pretty okay at the casual-friend *thing*. Carol'd tried to stay good to her word—no incessant text messages, no date-like interactions, no drunk booty calls (and Jessica'd stolen her phone the one time to make *sure* of that)—and she'd hung in there. Sure, some evenings felt pretty lonely, and sure, she hated watching hockey playoffs alone in her apartment instead of out with James, but most the time, she landed on solid ground.

As solid as the mushy track under her battered sneakers. She glared at where Jessica—dressed in black jogging pants and a strappy red tank-top—flirted with the scruffy groundskeeper.

"So much for training," she muttered to herself.

"And here, I thought you just missed me," James joked. Carol jerked her head over to find that he'd caught up to run right next to her. He flashed her another easy smile, and she felt her stomach turn to jelly. "Though stalking me to a charity 5K feels a little desperate, even for you."

"Yeah, well, after I stole all your dry cleaning and rooted through your garbage, I needed *something* to keep me going. Figured it was this or smashing my face against your window in the dead of night."

"You know, I was wondering about how the outside of my bedroom window got so greasy," he mused.

"Hey!" she protested, and he laughed when she smacked him on the arm. She sped up, a stupid form of punishment, and he somehow kept pace. She blamed his long legs in his shorts. She definitely did not *look* at those legs. "Just for that, I'm telling Tony to come to the race with the biggest *Go Rhodey* sign money can buy."

"You assume I haven't already convinced Pepper to keep him very busy on the morning of the

race.”

“I have it on good authority Pepper can be bought with shoes,” she retorted.

He snorted. “And she can be better bought by guys taking their best friends to all-day car shows on the other side of the state, so unless you’re gonna spend a *whole* day with Tony . . . ”

Carol pulled a face at that, and James laughed warmly. They fell into a companionable silence, their sneakers beating the track as they looped back around to the start line. Despite the fact she’d sworn to only do a mile—“Because I have things to do, Jessica,” she’d griped at her best friend before she’d realized the training day would become *flirt with unwashed strangers armed with rakes* day—she started into another lap just to avoid leaving him.

A lovesick puppy bullshit thing to do, maybe, but he kept flashing her a smile as they rounded the first bend, and how could she *not* fall a little for that?

“When I first started working at my office, a whole big group of us did this 5K every year,” he volunteered at one point, and Carol twisted to glance over at him. He shrugged slightly, still easily keeping pace. “Over time, people dropped out, and now, I’m the last one. It’s kind of nice to be able to run with a familiar face, instead of all the serious racers who meet up at every track day to run each other like cattle dogs.”

Carol grinned. “And you’d know cattle dogs?”

“Hey, I’ve watched *Babe* more times than any grown man should admit to, and sheep aren’t much better than cows,” he returned, and she laughed. He laughed too, a little softer, and knocked his elbow against hers. “What I’m saying,” he pressed, “is that if you want somebody to run with, right up to this race, you let me know.”

He sent her a quick look—hopeful, maybe, though Carol refused to call it that—and she felt her stomach twist and turn. She swallowed around it and, at least for a minute or two, dropped her eyes down toward the track. “I’m technically supposed to be training with Jess,” she finally said, “but I kind of think she has other ideas.”

“Do I wanna know?” James asked. She nodded in the direction of Jessica and Mister Scruffy—Jessica was gripping his arm and laughing at this point—and he snorted. “Flirting with the guy who rakes the grass around the track sure puts a whole new twist on the concept of ‘speed dating.’”

“Don’t let her hear that, she’ll ask if he has a brother.”

“You could do worse than the guy who mops the floor, or whatever his brother does,” James offered, and Carol tried to smile even as her heart sank deep into her gut. Whether James sensed this or not, she couldn’t tell, but he nudged her lightly in the arm. “Run with me in the mornings,” he encouraged, his voice light but full of something like promise. When their eyes met, Carol’s stomach twisted all over again. “I mean, it’s better than the alternative, right?”

She frowned. “The alternative being?”

“Running with Rake Boy over there,” he replied, and he laughed when Carol purposely ran her shoulder into his as they rounded the next bend.

In the car, Jessica—sweat-less and smiling, the little shit—kicked her feet up on the dash and sighed happily. “Saw you talking with the former boy toy. You work something out?”

“I’m certainly not working out with *you* anymore,” Carol returned, but she couldn’t help her smile as she shoved Jessica’s feet off the dash.

Loki took in a deep breath and counted to ten before pasting an obviously false smile on his face. “There must be some mistake,” he said as calmly as possible. Which was not all that much; his words were as tight as his fake grin. “I made the reservation two days ago, and I called to confirm this morning. It is under the name Laufeyson. Will you please check again?”

The young woman serving as hostess sighed and made a show of running her finger down the list of names. She shook her head and offered an apologetic shrug. “Sorry, I don’t see it. If you want me to put your name down, the wait will be about three hours.”

Darcy scoffed behind him. “Yeah, we’re not doing that. Are you sure the name isn’t under something else? Odinson maybe?”

Loki ducked his head in an attempt to hide the flush in his cheeks. He didn’t think Darcy knew that it was Mother, wife of a bank president, who’d sweet-talked his name onto the reservation list, and he wanted to keep it that way.

“Sorry, I don’t see that name here, either,” the hostess apologized.

Loki sighed. “If you could just look one more—“

“Excuse us for a second,” Darcy interrupted. She grabbed Loki by the arm and pulled him off to a quiet corner of the swanky waiting area, her stilettos clicking on the granite floor. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

Her tone was mean, but her eyes spoke of her confusion. “I’m trying to get them to remember that I absolutely—“

“Loki,” she sighed with an eye roll. “I’ve seen your apartment, and I’m well aware of your status as a grad student extraordinaire. There is no way you can afford a place like this.”

He felt his features harden at her words. “I’ll have you know, that I am completely—“

She waved him quiet. “Whatever. I’d just end up ordering a side salad out of guilt and be hangry in twenty minutes flat. Let’s go.”

Loki rolled his lips to keep from responding, sensing there was no way he was going to win the fight. He looked around the upscale restaurant, taking in the warm and rich ambiance. He had plans for tonight, grand plans. And they were melting away, drops falling through his fingers.

“C’mon,” Darcy said again as she tugged on his arm. The restaurant was nice, but it was nothing compared to the sly grin she threw over her shoulder.

He was so very much in trouble.

She took his hand in his, lacing their fingers together. The contact made him flush all over, and he was grateful for the dark night out so that the blush wasn’t blatantly obvious on his ridiculously pale skin. Darcy pulled him along for several blocks until the scenery changed from “rich people swank,” as she’d called it when they arrived at the restaurant, to a younger and artsier vibe. Loki had no problem seeing Darcy in this environment, the kind with the green coffeeshops, vintage clothes stores, and tattoo parlors. That last one intrigued him greatly.

He got lost in watching her brunette curls bounce along behind her and didn't realize they'd arrived at their location until they'd stopped moving. There was an obnoxious noise coming from a jukebox, and the neon lighting from signs hung everywhere—walls and ceiling alike—was harsh on his eyes. The blaring oldies music was interrupted by the sounds of crashes. Loki looked to his right to see a dozen bowling lanes, but there was something slightly off about them.

“Duckpin bowling,” Darcy announced with a wide grin. “Like regular bowling, except the balls and pins are smaller and you get an extra turn each frame. C'mon.”

She pulled him forward once more until they arrived at the counter. The man working it recognized Darcy on sight and was grabbing for her shoe size before she even said hello. Loki gave his shoe size and tried not to look too grossed out when he was handed a pair of well-worn bowling shoes that looked older than he was. Darcy paid for two games and then shoved Loki off in the direction of the bar to secure them a pitcher of beer and whatever food he found acceptable.

When he joined Darcy at their lane, she was lacing up her shoes. She'd managed to pull out a pair of socks from somewhere. “One must always be ready for bowling,” she told him solemnly.

He couldn't help the smile that overtook his face. He was sure they looked ridiculous: him in his one good suit that was reserved for defending dissertations and for when his mother tricked him into nights at the opera, Darcy in a maroon dress that clung in all the right places. Her bowling shoes clashed immensely with the look, but Loki suddenly found himself appreciating them more than the stilettos.

Barely.

Darcy went first, flinging the softball-sized ball down the lane to leave her with a seven-ten split that caused her to mutter a string of curses. She arched an eyebrow when she realized he was staring at her. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Just admiring your skills,” he answered.

Darcy jabbed a finger into his chest. “I was going to kick your ass anyway, but now I'm definitely going to do it.”

“We'll see about that,” he challenged.

She absolutely kicked his ass.

They spent two hours bowling and gorging themselves on greasy food. When they meandered back to his car, it was done once more hand in hand. And when he pulled into her driveway, she leaned over to kiss the corner of his mouth. “We're never going to be Jane and Thor,” she told him quietly.

Loki sighed. “I've lived in the shade of my brother my whole life. It can be quite intimidating attempting a relationship when I have that to live up to.”

“Please,” Darcy snorted, “I literally live in their shadow. I can see into their bedroom from mine, which can be mortifying and highly entertaining all at the same time. But look,” she said with a serious tone. “We're never going to be like them, as much as it will bug us—or at least, as much as it will bug me. We're not the perfect-fancy-dinner kind of couple. We're going to fuck things up.”

Loki felt the corner of his mouth pull upwards. “We're the duckpin bowling type?”

“Exactly,” Darcy beamed.

He couldn't help himself. He leaned in closer, but thankfully, she closed the distance. Her lips—full and sweet—felt amazing, and the baser parts of his mind couldn't help but imagine how fantastic they would feel on other parts of him. He pulled away with a slight shake of his head. “Thank you for a lovely evening.”

“Anytime,” she grinned before climbing out of the car. Before he could pull away, she stuck her head back in the door. “You should use the money I saved you tonight for buying me flowers. Send them to me at work tomorrow,” she instructed with a wink.

Oh yes, Loki thought as he watched Darcy enter her home. So very much trouble.

The End of the Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil tried to pretend otherwise, but one of the great universal truths was this: eventually, the kids who qualified for the Accelerated Reader overnight were split up into their gender-specific sleepover rooms, where they curled up in their sleeping bags and snored through the tail end of some literature-based movie (usually *Muppet Treasure Island*). And once that happened, Phil got a rare opportunity to bask in alone time with Clint.

It was never as kinky as the other teachers liked to make it—it was hard to justify prolonged supply-closet trysts with small children sleeping nearby—but sitting up with Clint and talking into the wee hours of the morning felt intimate and special. Like their first months of dating, Phil often thought, when they'd still be lounging together at dawn, talking quietly as the sun stretched across the bed—and, if Phil was honest, against the naked plane of Clint's back. He'd learned the shape of Clint's body in those early mornings, the contours of his muscles and the lines on his face. He'd fallen in love with Clint through those conversations, and in the sleepy kisses that followed.

He always felt close to Clint, like they shared not just the same air and home but the same heart. Still, they sometimes needed those talks (and of course, the occasional weekends away) to recharge.

Those talks had been a long time in coming, lately.

As it stood, Phil leaned against the wall outside the girl's sleepover room (more commonly referred to as the art room) and watched Clint talk to one of the fourth-graders, a girl with messy hair and thick glasses. Her name was Samantha—Sam for short—and she spent almost an hour in the library after school each day, devouring books like she was afraid someone'd snatch them from her hands. Phil and Clint both knew from conversations with Pepper and Carol that Sam's family was transient, drifting from one motel to another and occasionally living out of their car or a shelter, but Sam always arrived to school clean and cheery.

Once, Phil'd encouraged her to check out some books, and she'd shaken her head. "I don't want to lose them," she'd told him seriously. "We lose things, sometimes, when we move."

Phil'd let her pick a few books out of the box under his desk after that conversation, and promised that she didn't have to worry about losing them.

Sam'd woken up and wandered out into the hallway a half-hour ago, disoriented and wide-eyed, and Clint'd offered to talk her down. As Phil watched, she laughed, her face relaxed for the first time since she'd found them out on their rounds. Phil felt his stomach clench at the way Clint grinned at her, and again when Clint turned his grin on him.

Sorry, Clint signed.

Phil smiled. *Nothing to be sorry for*, he signed back, and Clint's grin blinded him.

Lately, Clint's grin died the second they walked in their front door, doubling in on itself until it transformed into a permanent, ugly scowl. In the evenings, Phil could trace the lines on his husband's brow and the corners of his mouth as he watched the clock and the front window, waiting for his brother to come home. Most nights, Barney only came in when he knew they'd be

in bed, leaving again in the wee hours of the morning. Twice, Phil'd found a twenty-dollar bill wedged under the coffee pot.

The second time it'd happened, Clint'd snorted and rolled his eyes. "He's making a point."

"Aren't you doing the same thing?" Phil'd replied, and Clint's scowl had started early, that morning.

At this point, the brothers barely spoke to each other, and Phil had yet to find a good time to sit Barney down and force him into a conversation.

It would happen. He just needed Clint to be otherwise indisposed, first.

Wrapped up in his thoughts as he was, Phil didn't notice that Clint'd coaxed Sam back into the art room until his husband materialized in front of him. He plastered his hands on Phil's hips and immediately crowded into his personal space. "Sorry," he murmured, close to Phil's ear. "I know this is the part where we convince everybody I'm blowing you in the supply closet, but she needed to talk."

"And to think, I recorded last night's session for nothing," Phil deadpanned.

Clint snorted, but then his face pressed into the skin of Phil's neck. When Phil tipped closer to him and wrapped arms around his waist, he sighed. "This whole month's been a fucking mess," he said quietly. "I'm all over the place, behind on everything, and it's all because I'm babysitting a giant fucking toddler. Then we come here, I get distracted by a nine-year-old, and—"

He released an uneven huff of breath, and Phil shook his head. "It's okay."

"No, Phil, it isn't, and the more you say that—"

"I say it because it's *true*," Phil interrupted. When he leaned back enough that Clint had no choice but to pick up his head, he met his eyes. "As angry as you are at him, Barney's still your brother. And even if you don't ever talk about it, or put words to how you feel, it's bound to eat at you." Clint glanced away, worrying his lips together. "It'd eat at anyone, Clint. And it's okay to admit that it is."

"It's just—" Clint started, but he paused to swallow. When he looked back at Phil, he was as wide-eyed and disoriented as Samantha had been a half-hour earlier. "Barney was there for me through a whole bunch of shit," he explained, "and then, one day, he wasn't. And I had to figure out how to patch over the huge brother-shaped hole there, and every time I got close, he filled it up just to empty it out again." He sighed and rested his forehead against Phil's shoulder. "I don't know how to fix him, and I don't want him to break us."

Something in Phil's heart that still felt vulnerable after all these years—some tiny part that still swore he'd lose Clint to someone smarter or younger or more interesting—drew up tight enough to hurt. He pressed his face against Clint's hair and pulled his husband close. "Your wayward brother can't break us," he promised, "because *nothing* can."

Carol sat down on the barstool with a sigh. The last day of school was always physically exhausting, but it was emotionally draining, too. Jess had offered to come out with her tonight to celebrate their now student-free status, but Carol had declined. She doubted Jessica minded since her friend was too busy planning a late-afternoon "run" so she could visit her new grounds-keeping boy toy.

Plus, Carol wasn't in the mood to celebrate. Sure, she could understand why some teachers were excited to get rid of their kids—the Hill twins most certainly would not be missed—but it was different for Carol. She focused all her time and energy on a dozen kids. She spent two years brushing away tears, celebrating victories, and working her ass off for those students. Carol knew the ins and outs of each of their families—which parents they lived with during the week and on the weekends, names and ages of siblings, phone numbers, and more overshares than she could possibly remember. It was not unusual for her to receive emails and gifts on the last day of school, and today was no different. One very generous set of parents gave her a gift card large enough to cover a couple pairs of new shoes if she hit up a sale.

Fifth grade and kindergarten were the two grades in the elementary school that merited graduation ceremonies. The little ones had theirs last week, but the fifth grade ceremony was always saved for the final day of the year. It meant dressing up when all the other teachers in the building wore matching t-shirts representing the grade they taught. Second grade had the added benefit of a free design from an art teacher on theirs, which thrilled Jess to no end. She liked to rub it in Carol's face that she got away with casual wear on the last day of school, but Carol's kids were worth spending the day in heels. Also worth spending the day in heels? Intimidating the hell out of Clint.

Fury always spoke at the beginning of the ceremony. He thanked the kids for all their hard work in their time at the school and wished them the best of luck on their adventures in middle school. Then he read off each student's name. Home room teachers were responsible for handing out the Microsoft Word template diplomas to their own kids, with the exception of Carol's students. The fifth grade teachers always made sure she got to hand the certificates out to her caseload.

Every year she swore to herself on the drive to school in the morning that she wasn't going to cry. And every damn year, this one included, she teared up like a pregnant woman watching Oprah. Or something.

"This seat taken?" a voice asked.

She was going to blow the guy off, but then she recognized who was talking to her. "It's not if you buy me a drink," she answered.

James grinned and signaled the bartender. "Of all the gin joints in... whatever that line is."

"Hey, this was my bar first. I brought you here, and you were the one who jumped on the bandwagon."

"The bandwagon has an excellent taste in microbrews," he argued.

"Snob," Carol muttered.

"And proud of it. Happy summer to you, by the way."

"Thanks," Carol responded with a smile that she knew didn't reach her eyes.

James squinted at her. "Normally, teachers are happy about having a little bit of a break."

"There's nothing normal about your best friend."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Never said there was, and I never would dream of saying something like that." He took a sip of his beer, eyes sliding her way. "You okay?"

Carol rolled her lips and focused her attention on the label of her half-empty beer bottle. "I have a problem with getting attached to my kids."

James nodded. “Hard to let ‘em go sometimes, isn’t it? You see them through some rough shit, and just when things level out, you have to say goodbye and start the process with someone new.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

He reached over and patted her arm. “Been there. I get it.”

She didn’t say anything, and his hand didn’t move. For a moment, they just sat in memories of faces they’d had to let go. “Okay,” she declared, “no more talk about kids. This is way too depressing for two attractive people on a Friday night.”

“What do you think we should do instead?”

He had that smirk on his face. She knew that smirk. It was the one that caused her insides to liquefy in a pool of heat. He’d talked her into doing a number of things with that smirk, and she hated that it still drew her in like a super-powered magnet.

“I think I should go home,” she answered.

“C’mon, Carol, just one dance from the jukebox. For old time’s sake.”

“And then what?” she asked. She hadn’t meant for her voice to sound a little harsh, but it was probably for the best. Jess was doing who-knew-what with lawn boy, leaving Carol without a wingman to bail her ass out of stupid trouble. “Look, it’s been an emotional day for me, and I don’t want to do something dumb. I think I’ve done enough idiotic things around you, and neither of us needs to be hurt anymore. So how about we just sit here and talk shit at athletes before calling it a night?”

James looked her over, studying her, and it always made her nervous when people did that. Whether it was her father, her commanding officer, or her principal, she always felt the need to be standing at attention when it happened. “Sounds like a plan,” he replied before holding up a finger to let her know he wasn’t finished. “But next time, we’re dancing.”

“Deal,” she agreed as they clinked the beer bottles together.

“Tony?”

All Pepper got in response was a muffled grunt. She sighed and began looking down the rows of computers until she spotted a pair of legs sticking out from under a table in the back corner of the lab. She may have sighed out of her right as a wife who was being held hostage at work (she knew they should’ve driven separately this morning, but he’d sweet-talked her out of it). Still, she couldn’t help smile a little bit. “You know you have all summer.”

Tony shimmied out from the table and took a deep breath. “Smell that? That is the aroma of an empty school building. And do you know what I get to do when there’s an empty school building?”

“Act like a crazy person?”

“No,” Tony responded, drawing out the word for several seconds. “I finally get to clean my lab, and it stays clean. These poor keyboards have spent months with snot and germs and god-knows-what, and when I sanitize them tonight? They will stay clean for weeks.” He raised his hands in the air and twirled around in some sort of rain dance to the anti-bacterial gods.

Pepper felt her face scrunch in guilt. “So no one told you?” she asked hesitantly.

“Told me what?”

“That they’re using this lab for summer school.” Pepper sat on the one clean corner of Tony’s desk as he began to rant and rave.

“I’ve put my own money into this lab—“

“No one asked you to do that.”

“And the one time of the year it can stay clean—“

“You won’t be here.”

“Was this Fury’s idea?”

“If I say yes, will you drop it so we can go eat dinner?” Pepper asked. “Because it’s six o’clock, and I would really like to go home—even though I know full well you could stay here till two in the morning doing your cleaning thing.”

Tony’s shoulders slumped as he pouted his bottom lip slightly. “They really couldn’t find any other place to do summer school? I mean, I’m all for education and integrating technology, but really?”

“There are actual worse things that could happen,” Pepper said.

“Are you planning on leaving me any time soon?” he asked as he walked over to her.

“No,” she said with a smile.

“Then nothing is worse than this,” he said before he started walking around the lab and personally apologizing to each computer station.

It was supposed to be a carefree Saturday afternoon of packing up his classroom. Bruce spent the morning, as always, with Tony, going to their weekly AA meeting before hitting up the diner for chili fries and milkshakes. Once they were done, Bruce left for school, where he met Natasha. She’d volunteered to help him pack up his classroom for the summer. Granted Fury’d made sure that they’d get time over the two days the staff still had to work next week to clean up their rooms, but Natasha had made him a deal involving black lace as a reward for him spending that time helping her sterilize her gym equipment.

And who was he to turn down helping his girlfriend? Or black lace?

It was supposed to be a carefree Saturday afternoon, and then in the middle of boxing books, Natasha declared, “You want kids.”

Bruce swallowed as he taped up a box. He’d been waiting for this discussion ever since Jessica showed up with Dani, and he kicked himself for not hiding things better. The last thing he wanted to do was to scare Natasha away, and he knew this could do it. Bruce felt that she’d been off since that afternoon—and since Bruce stupidly brought up the point that he was supposed to be the father of an incoming kindergartener. A little hungover bird with an art teacher for a boyfriend had only confirmed Bruce’s fears. “It doesn’t mean we—I—have to have them.”

Natasha nodded, her lips pursed. “I don’t think I want to,” she admitted quietly.

Bruce felt his stomach somersault at those six words. It honestly wasn't an idea he entertained too often, mostly because he figured this would be her response, but his self-control wasn't perfect. Every now and then, he pictured a kid with curly hair and a stubborn streak. He felt his chest seize as that mental image—vague as it was—disappeared into nothing. "It's okay," he finally remembered to say.

"But it's something you want," Natasha replied.

He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but he could feel bitterness slip into it. "I don't always get what I want." Natasha's head tilted to the side, her eyes looking suddenly sad. Bruce shook his head and returned his focus to boxing books.

"I wish it was something I wanted," she said quietly. "It would make things easier, and it would probably also make me a nicer person."

"You're a nice person," Bruce argued.

"I could be better. I just don't know how."

Bruce sighed and left the boxes alone. He crossed the room to sit on the edge of the kidney-shaped table Natasha was scrubbing down. "You're better than you think you are. I've seen you get better, seen you heal. Losing someone is a hard thing to recover from, I know. You're doing fine, Natasha."

She stared at him for a moment. He could tell by her far-off gaze that she was trying to shove puzzle pieces together in her mind, but things weren't fitting together just yet. "I was thinking—"

"I could practically hear that happening," Bruce chuckled.

Natasha shot him a little glare before she continued. "Just because we're not going to do the kid thing doesn't mean we can't try something new, something more."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "I think you know I'm up for trying new things. Just let my thighs recover from last night's experimenting."

She smirked and bumped her shoulder against his before continuing. "I was thinking we could move in together."

"We could... Wait, what?" Bruce sputtered.

"You don't think it's a good idea?" Natasha asked.

Bruce's mouth worked for a second while his brain tried to process her words. Her offer was not at all something he expected. "I'm still trying to figure out why a woman as young and gorgeous as you would want to date me, and now you want to move in with me?" He shook his head. "I'm just... Are you sure?" There was a tiny voice in his head whispering that maybe something wasn't right. His luck wasn't this good, never had been.

Natasha nodded. "Parker was asking around for a sublet for the summer, trying to save money for a place of his own. I think May will pay me double whatever I charge him in rent just to get him out of the house." She shrugged. "Peter gets a fully furnished condo for a couple months at a good price, and you get to have me around all the time."

Bruce smiled at the thought. It would be nice—hell, it would be a dream—to have her around all the time. "I guess we have been spending more nights together than apart lately."

“You complaining?” Natasha asked with an arched eyebrow.

“No, not at all,” Bruce answered. “I just think if you move in I’ll have to double my chiropractor appointments.”

Natasha moved to stand between his legs, pouting slightly. “I can play nice,” she said as she ran fingers through his hair. He moaned at the touch, and it grew louder when her nails scraped against his scalp. “But I think you like it when I don’t play nice.”

“Maybe,” he said with a small grin. “You sure want to do this?”

And then he saw it—or at least, maybe he saw it. That flash of her raising her chin in a challenge, a glimpse of her former life as a nearly-Olympic-level athlete. It also had a hint of an expression he saw often in his classroom: the need for approval.

“Tasha, is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “It just makes sense. We’ve been together for long enough, we spend most nights together. Might as well bite the bullet.”

“You’re not trying to play catch-up to your best friend, are you?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “My love-sick dope of a friend has nothing to do with this.”

Bruce studied her for a moment, looking for cracks in her armor. Whatever he’d seen a moment ago, if it was even there in the first place, was gone. He stood and kissed her deeply. “Guess I should make you a key?” he asked while they were catching their breaths.

Natasha smirked at him. “I stole the spare out of your desk two months ago.”

“Summer!” Henry screamed for the fifth time, performing his fifth cannonball.

Don’t get Darcy wrong, no kids could equal those produced by Jane and Thor, but if she had to reapply her sunscreen after only being outdoors for ten minutes, she was going to lose her shit. She had alabaster skin, alright? It required an SPF high enough that when you squeezed the bottle, a sweater came out. But it kept her cancer-free, and maybe she liked being super pale, okay?

Jane, stretched out on the lounge chair next to her, sighed. “Don’t tell Thor he was right about me needing sunshine.”

Darcy smiled, “The sky can be cool when the stars aren’t shining, you know. It’s this really pretty blue color. I don’t know if you’ve seen it recently.”

She was sure Jane would spit a comeback, but Alva interrupted to have her mother readjust her neon pink floaty armband things. “I love summer,” she proclaimed dreamily. “Don’t you love summer, Miss Darcy?”

“I think you only like it because your parents only let you swim in my parents’ pool when school is out.”

“That’s not the—“ She stopped mid-sentence to gasp as Henry did another cannonball. This one violated the rules Jane had established of where he could and couldn’t jump into the pool (so that she herself could stay dry). “Stop splashing me!” Alva screamed.

“Hey,” Jane snapped. “Both of you stop or George is going to be the only allowed in the pool.”

Henrik, you know the rules about where to jump in. Alva, honey, you're swimming in a pool—you're going to get wet. Now, go play." Alva sent one last murderous look to her oldest brother before easing her way back into the water. Jane monitored the situation for a moment before leaning back in her lounge chair. "Excited about spending your summer in the office?"

Darcy shrugged. "It's really not that bad. Everything is quieter, I get to play my music most of the time, casual dress—can't complain."

"Are you taking any time off?"

"My parents are taking a vacation in a couple weeks. Dad wants to visit more Civil War battle sites, so I will definitely be staying home while they're gone. But, yeah, I'll probably need to escape from Mom for a little bit this summer or else we might kill each other."

"I'd offer to take you with us when we visit Thor's parents, but that sounds like more of a punishment than a vacation," Jane said.

"No, thanks," Darcy told her. "But if you want to acquire a dog or even a fish just long enough that you need someone to pet-sit while you're gone, I'm your girl."

Jane shook her head. "If I get a dog that only stays at our house while we're not there, I'm not sure if my children or my husband would murder me first."

Darcy sensed a sudden uneasiness in her best friend. Jane was wiggling slightly in her chair, just like her daughter did when she didn't want to admit to something. "What is it?" Darcy asked.

"It's nothing."

"Your squirming says otherwise."

Jane rolled her lips. "Loki had a date the other night. He told Thor. I know you and him had a little bit of a whatever, and I didn't want you to find out from someone else or have the kids tell you."

Darcy debated on what to do next. She and Loki hadn't really talked about how open they were going to be about their dates—they'd had two now. But they were both agreed that Thor wasn't going to find out any time soon. He'd start planning a wedding before they hit date number five.

"That's okay," Darcy said, not quite able to hide her smile. "I've started seeing someone, too."

"You wanna tell me what's really going on," Nick asked, "or do I have to start guessing?"

Jasper, paragon of grace and dignity like he was, dumped Seoul-style taco sauce all over his goddamn lap.

For teachers, the last couple days before the school finally closed down for the year was this fun, chummy time where everybody packed up their classrooms and snarked at each other until the halls were full of sound. Jasper appreciated that—he'd taught for a while, years ago (high school history, let them never speak about it again)—but at the same time, as an administrator? The last couple days of the school year just needed to be *over*. Seriously, did you want to process payroll and purchase orders and enrollment shit? Did you want to field all the calls about the kids who were moving across the district and their missing paperwork? Did *you* want to listen to Stark bitch about how somebody chewed through a power cable (and nobody chewed through it, Stark, it probably got caught in a vacuum cleaner)?

Yeah, that's what he *thought*.

And that was why, at about one-thirty in the afternoon, Jasper Sitwell was in his chair, his feet kicked up onto the corner of his desk, listening to some jazz on Spotify and eating Korean tacos from the taco place with the weird hours.

The operative word being “was,” because he sat straight up as soon as his boss strode into his doorway.

Nick smirked at him, a disturbing little twist of his lips, and planted his shoulder against the doorjamb. With his sleeves rolled up, he looked almost human. Kind of.

Jasper swallowed his half-chewed mouthful and reached for his iced tea. “You’re going to have to give me a better hint than that, because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “You don’t.”

“Nope.”

“Not a clue.”

“None whatsoever.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Nick intoned, and Jasper—like the mature and put together elementary school administrator he happened to be—played with his straw. For a moment, they stared at each other, locked in some sort of weird game of chicken.

It wasn’t until Jasper slurped up the last of his tea, ugly straw noise and all, that Nick rolled his eye. “Sitwell, what’s the one thing I always say I like about you?” he asked.

Jasper frowned. “That I know all the best food places and aren’t afraid to—”

“*Besides* that.”

The edge to his tone made Jasper sit up a little straighter. He suddenly realized what Parker must’ve felt like when put through the whole Queen-song wringer. He rolled his lips together to keep from smiling at the memory before he replied, “That I’m predictable.”

“Exactly,” Nick said with a nod, and something in Jasper’s stomach twisted itself into a knot. “I could hook you up to our bell system and never need to worry again because they’d always go off on time. I hand you the detail work ‘cause I know it’ll be in three days early with everything triple-checked. Hell, I can tell by the shirt you’re wearing if it’s meatball sub special day at Little Mercutio’s.”

“To be fair,” Jasper said with a raise of his hand, “their marinara sauce’s extra chunky and never washes out of *anything*.”

“Learned *that* the one time I picked the restaurant for date night,” Nick replied, and this time, Jasper definitely smiled. At least, until Nick pushed away from the door. Slowly, like a big cat preparing for the kill, he crossed his arms and raised both eyebrows. “So imagine my surprise,” he continued, “when, for the first time since I hired you—the first time since I *met* you—I haven’t spent all spring listening to you count down to the crazy foodie road trip you’re taking over the summer summer.”

All at once, Jasper’s heart crash landed in his gut. Because yeah, Nick had a point: he almost

always took a trip right at the end of the school year, mostly for the purposes of finding great new food. Last year, he'd spent a week in Portland, eating out of food trucks and reading at Powell's (explains why he gained ten pounds that summer); the year before, he'd gorged himself on the best that New Orleans had to offer. He'd once saved up all school year to visit some of New York City's most acclaimed restaurants (many of which were disappointing), and his first summer after graduate school, he'd literally eaten his way across Europe. He loved food, he loved seeing the country (and the world), he loved spending a few days away from piles of paperwork and administrative duties—

And this year, he also happened to be carrying one hell of a torch for a single mom who barely had the extra cash for a babysitter, never mind a trip to San Francisco. Jasper'd almost offered to pay, too, but the voice in his head'd muttered about taking it slow, and he was trying.

He was really, *really* trying, dammit.

He rubbed the back of his neck, aware that Nick was still staring him down. Finally, he sighed. "We've been kind of keeping it under wraps," he admitted slowly, "but I'm, you know, seeing somebody. Not seriously, but enough that I want to be around for the summer. Especially since she's going through some stuff with her kids, and—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "Foodie trips can wait, you know?"

In the doorway, Nick pressed his lips together and nodded sagely—or at least, what Jasper figured he *thought* was sagely. For a couple seconds, Jasper thought that'd be the end of it, but then he saw something flicker across Nick's expression. It grew slowly, spreading like a plague, until—

"Are you fucking grinning?" Jasper demanded, and Nick burst out laughing. He immediately flicked a pen across his office. "You knew! Danvers told you, and you—"

"Danvers?" Nick demanded once he'd recovered from his full-on belly laughs. "Not Danvers. Melinda. We bet six weeks ago that you'd cave before Hill did. Glad to see I wasn't wrong."

"I hate you," Jasper sneered. "You and your fucking wife."

"And since you're happy for once in your damn life, I can take that," Nick returned.

Jasper threw a napkin at his back on principle.

"How'd you acquire this much junk in a single year?" Steve teased.

He hefted a box as he said it, his muscles tensing under his skin-tight t-shirt, and for a moment, Bucky watched appreciatively. He'd started out lugging the boxes around himself, but then his boyfriend'd muttered something about lifting from the knees and back strain and promptly claimed the job as his own. Not that he planned on complaining.

Steve glanced over his shoulder, met Bucky's eyes, and frowned. "What?"

Bucky shrugged. "I was just thinking that I'm glad I hoarded so much fourth grade stuff, because now I get to watch you carry it upstairs," he replied.

"And you get to owe me later," Steve returned, his voice full of promise as he headed out the door.

Bucky laughed, shaking his head, and surveyed his classroom for what felt like the hundredth time in the last twenty-four hours. Wanda'd practically fled from school in a cloud of dust and cackling the second their last in-service ended, her classroom so pure and spotless that Bucky wondered

whether she'd wished *no more students* into reality. He'd poked through her skeletal AR library, flipped through her supplements, and pawed through her supply closet before deciding he needed to dig into storage for his own materials, and the end result'd involved hauling a lot of boxes to school, sorting through them, and then bringing them upstairs. Wanda's room—his new room, he reminded himself—now looked like a federal disaster area.

His old room, soon to be Peter Parker's, stood half-empty and, well, sad.

He picked up a few random bits and bobs from his desk and tried not to think about how strange and amazing the school year'd been. Leaving his old school'd felt like maybe ditching the devil he knew for the devil he didn't, but Natasha'd never let him down. Natasha, who'd bullied him into the interview and then, into a whole lot of other things: payday happy hours, betting pools, dodgeball, and Steve.

She'd talked a lot about him being happy, back at the beginning of the school year, convinced him not to totally hide his feelings and whatever else. And as a result, he'd met somebody who actually cared the way he—

Something touched his back, and he nearly leapt out of his skin. When he whirled around, Steve held up both hands. "Those Army reflexes are really in there deep," he said, his smile not quite genuine. When Bucky blinked at him, he nodded down to Bucky's hand—and the safety scissors Bucky was holding like a weapon. He rolled his eyes, and Steve's expression softened. "You okay?"

"If you think I'm going to stab you with safety scissors, we have to have a long talk about—"

"Bucky." The way Steve said it, breathless and private, still made Bucky's stomach swim. He glanced over, and Steve lifted his eyebrows. "Don't think I haven't noticed."

"Noticed what?"

"The way you sat with Tony and me at the last couple meetings this week. The way you keep getting quiet every time any kind of group outing comes up." Bucky snorted and shoved the scissors back into his pencil cup. He set everything into a box, but then Steve caught his wrist. He stared at Steve's big, gentle hand instead of meeting his puppy-dog eyes. "Don't make me go straight for the gut punch."

Bucky raised his chin. "And what gut punch is that?"

"The one where I point out that you're avoiding Natasha."

Bucky felt his shoulders stiffen, and he immediately twisted away from Steve and out of his grip. He abandoned the crap on his desk to go over and stand at the window, his hands pressed to the sill. He and Steve had talked about the Natasha situation, sure, but over a lot of vodka and then, between a lot of kissing. A lawn chair'd died under their combined weight, and with it, the talking had pretty much ended. And for the most part, Bucky didn't mind. After all, it wasn't like he knew how to explain how close he and Natasha were, or how much she'd meant to him over the years. Not without sounding like an idiot and a sap.

Steve loomed behind him for several long, tense seconds, his reflection a hazy shadow in the window. "She was better at this than I am," Bucky finally said.

"At what?"

"At being with somebody and still being a good friend." Steve opened his mouth to reply, but

Bucky shook his head as he turned to face him. "I know she'll come around," he admitted. "I know that she'll work out whatever she's going through the way she always does, and then she'll be back at my door with vodka and that terrifying smile of hers. I just wish I knew how to build that bridge faster."

Steve smiled gently as he reached out to snag Bucky by the side of his t-shirt. "Our," he corrected.

Bucky blinked. "Our what?"

"Our door. Not just yours." Steve tugged them together, his arms settling around Bucky's waist, and Bucky ran his hands up Steve's sides. "Like you said, she'll come around," he said. It sounded like a vow, coming from him. "And maybe we both need to learn to be better friends to her. I don't know her as well as I should. I can work on that."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "This from the practically perfect Mister Rogers."

Steve screwed up his face. "I'm not always perfect," he defended. "Really. I used to get into all kinds of trouble as a kid."

"I'd believe it if I saw it," Bucky returned.

"My mom probably has video somewhere," Steve retorted, and despite himself, Bucky laughed.

They stood there for a minute, Steve warm and *sure* as he held onto Bucky, Bucky with his fingers digging into Steve's waistband. Bucky wanted to just soak in the crazy, amazing reality of Steve, but he couldn't help thinking for a minute about how the one person who'd helped him set up his classroom was the one person who probably wouldn't come tear it down with him.

At least, not right now.

He didn't realize that his expression'd changed into something like a smile until Steve nudged his hip. "Something funny?"

He shrugged. "Just thinking about how much of this year belongs to Nat, too."

Steve smiled softly. "Because she helped you get this job?" he asked.

"No," Bucky replied honestly. "Because she helped me get *you*."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading through this monster of a story. In two weeks, we'll start "What I Did on My Summer Break". Once we get through everyone's summers, we'll start up school year number two with our awesome teachers.

But seriously: thank you.

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